



# EVERBLADE

G.M. BROWNING

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20 years ago.

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About the Author

# Everblade

G. M. Browning

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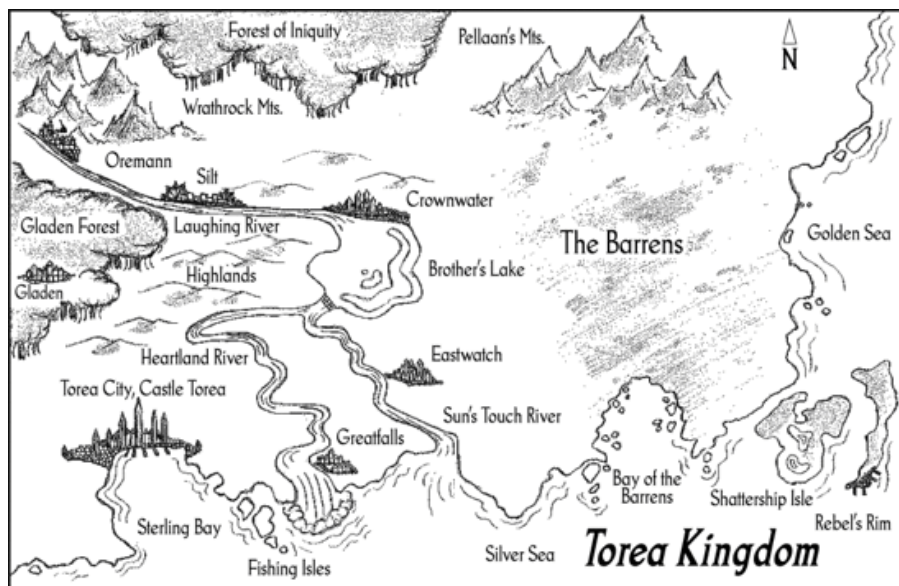
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For my son,  
Gardner David Browning

Like the characters within these pages,  
may your life be full of magic and adventure



20 years ago.



o one saw the young boy crouching in the dark alley. The school's tower rose above, covering him in a blanket of shadow. Black clouds rolled over the moon, darkening the road. *Perfect. Now is my chance.*

He crept through the alleyway and to the side door. Locked. He searched his pockets for his picks. *Where are they?* He cursed his ill luck. The thought of breaking into the professor's vault thrilled him to the point of forgetting his plan's critical tools. He panned the length of the tower wall and noticed a spider crawling upward. *Good idea.* He closed his eyes and rubbed his hands together. A magical rhythm sounded in his mind, the first indicator of a spell forming. He opened his tingling hands and touched the wall. His flesh bonded to the stones and he started to climb. With ease, he ascended to the professor's chamber window and dropped into the room. *A little firelight should do.* A ball of fire danced in his palm sending a soft yellow glow around him.

Books filled the chamber; some shelved, others stacked. He recognized them as tomes of magic spells and incantations. He'd read them all, except one. Tonight, he'd find out what was so special about the book in the vault and why the professor refused to share it with younger apprentices. *Perhaps it's a book of truly powerful magic, or a journal of a dark magician that tells his secret spells.* The boy's heart pounded as he snaked through the room, making his way to the far corner. He knelt beside the small, metal box and examined its lock. Without his picks, he'd need to use more magic. What could open it?

A rumble of thunder sounded in the distant night and rain pattered on the window. A streak of lightning illuminated the room, answering his question. He stepped back and aimed a steady hand at the lock. A trident of crackling energy surged from his palm, striking the vault. He smiled when the door fell off. Quickly, he reached in and drew out a small book wrapped in a blue and silver ribbon. The insignia of a sun and seven stars adorned the leather cover. Sitting at a small table, he lit a candle with a touch of magic fire and opened the book. *Poetry?*

**"The Legend of Torea"**

There once was a land, far to the east  
Where the Barrens stretch dead and dry.

A glorious kingdom,  
Everheart,  
As bright as the sun in the sky.

To guard their home, the mages of old  
Created a magical sword.

Its singular power,  
Breathing in  
The forces that conjure discord.

As some might foresee, the pit of greed  
Took root in a woman's desire.

A sorceress darkened,  
Lorelei.  
To be queen she did aspire.

The sword of true might, the Everblade,  
Absorbed all the witch's attacks.

So she poisoned the rain,  
Sickness poured  
Bringing death with a plague of black.

Everheart Kingdom crumbled and fell  
When Lorelei opened the ground.

The sword, in its tower,  
Fell into dark  
Lost in ruins and never found.

Everheart's mages combined their strength  
Subduing the witch with a bind.

To the western mountains,  
Locked, entombed.  
Imprisoned for the rest of time.

Centuries passed, a new kingdom formed.  
At the coast, its banner flew fast.

Torea Kingdom reigned.  
Seven flags.  
Not knowing the terrible past.

The day came when their city of mines  
Unearthed Lorelei's ancient tomb.

Everheart's destroyer,  
Filled with rage,  
Found Torea ripe to consume.



She breached the castle and killed the king.  
Every city suffered as one.  
And the merciless witch,  
Unopposed,  
Seized and ruled the throne of the sun.  
And rightly shall this legend be shared  
So that kings may protect their lands.  
Reminisce the power  
Of old foes.  
Pray to never die by their hands.

# Chapter 1



With sword in hand, Alek led his team of warriors toward the cave's entrance. Snow covered the trail, making it hard for the group to conceal the sound of their footsteps. The crunching ice echoed in the still night. The moonlight shone through the forest canopy in cold, silver columns.

"There." Alek pointed with the tip of his blade. "Korvin and his thieves have made a den of that cave. Let's drive out the vermin and take back the stolen gold. The king will be pleased to have Calmoren's coffers replenished." Alek turned to his brother. "Darren, are you ready?"

Darren peered out from under his black hood. He opened his hand and formed a ball of fire. The flame's glow banished the shadows from his face. "I'm ready."

The warriors drew their weapons. The chime of the steel made Alek's heart race. For several months, thieves sacked the capital city, often resorting to violence to obtain the riches they sought. The most recent crime was against the sacred Hall of Fathers, Calmoren's largest temple and treasury honoring the rulers of bygone generations. The commander of the Calmoren Militia had dispatched Alek and his men to bring the thieves' master, a notorious assassin named Korvin, to justice.

Alek led his men into the cave. Their torches lit the walls. Long icicles glittered like crystal fangs. After passing through a narrow corridor, the cave's interior opened to form a large room. They found several bedrolls scattered about, and made their way through another passage. Alek noticed the air growing stale and the prominent scent of decay. The group entered a second, smaller chamber where their torches revealed six dead men slumped against the far wall of the room. The warriors gathered to examine the bodies.

"They're all thieves," Alek said, "but Korvin is not with them." He sheathed his sword. "This place has become a tomb. Let's head back and report our findings."

Disappointed, Alek took leave of the cave. All but Darren followed.



Later that night, Alek sat at the bar in The Quiver'n Arrow Tavern, a local favorite among men of arms. He came to find merriment and to dilute the frustration he felt over being eluded by Korvin. He couldn't ignore the pressing feeling that he overlooked something in the cave.

Alek lifted his mug and took a draught of mead. *Korvin, you thieving knave, you won't escape me for long*, he thought as he swished the honeyed brew in his mouth.

A busty serving woman walked by and trailed her fingers along his wide shoulders. His neck craned to follow her bouncing, swaying figure. His wandering thoughts halted when the door swung open and a bald-headed Oskar hurried in. Alek recognized the worry in the old mage's face from across the room. He called out, "Greetings, Oskar."

Oskar pushed through the crowd of patrons, joining Alek at the bar. He took a moment to catch his breath. "I'm glad I've found you. I need your help."

"Slow down, tell me what happened." Alek turned toward the old man. Dried blood had crusted above Oskar's upper lip.

"I was on my way home when I remembered I left my new spell book at the school. I planned on reading after dinner. I went back to the western tower, where my study chamber is, and the key wouldn't work when I tried to unlock the door. I presumed it was frozen. I heated it with my magic and tried again. Nothing happened. I tried to push it open but it didn't budge."

"What about a spell of sealing?" Alek asked. Though not fluent in magic, he recalled his brother Darren using that simple spell as a prank many times as a boy.

"I thought of that as well, but when I listened for the cadence of the spell, I was knocked aside by a powerful jolt. A light shines from my window and an enormous dark cloud is blooming across the sky."

Alek put down his mug. "How can this happen? Few can rival your magic."

"I'm not certain."

Alek slung his sword and baldric over his shoulders and around his chest. "Let's go open that door."

As the two made their way out of the tavern, Oskar stopped and asked, "Where is your brother?"



Darren lit a fire in his palm that illuminated the cave's passages. Its heat dispelled the cold air around him. Once back in the chamber of bedrolls, he lifted one away, revealing a wooden hatch on the stone floor. He stomped on it with his boot. "Come out. They've left."

The hatch creaked open and Korvin, clad in black robes, slid out from the hidden passage like a black snake. His wiry frame hardly

made a shadow under Darren's flame. The two squared off. "It's been a pleasure doing business with you, Darren."

"This transaction is not complete until I get the ashes."

"Ah, yes." Korvin produced a golden urn and handed it over. "You've gone to great lengths for a handful of dirt. I'll never understand mages."

"This is not dirt. These are the combined remains of the Elders, the first masters of the magical arts. You have no idea of the power it will bring."

Darren opened the urn and examined the fine, white powder. The ashes scintillated like many tiny prisms. He opened his mind to hear its magical pulse—the deep resonance sounded like massive chimes knocking together in a fierce wind. The sound carved through his core, fanning his own internal power to a tempest that charged his very bones. Darren let out a slow breath to ease the invigorating thrill rushing through his limbs.

Korvin smirked. "Nothing is more powerful than gold. And, thanks to you, I've got a caravan full."

"And I see you've killed off your men, and in doing so, secured the secrecy of our arrangement. I believe our business is finished."

"Agreed." Korvin brushed by Darren, and sauntered toward the exit.

The fire in Darren's hand grew brighter, hotter. He called out, "A cold night waits outside. Take this to keep you warm."

Korvin turned to acknowledge the mage and an eruption of fire engulfed him. The stench of smoking meat and burnt leather filled the room. When the inferno diminished, a pile of smoldering ash remained where he had stood.

Darren blew out the flame in his palm and left the cave, returning to the snowy night. He mounted his horse and thundered through the forest, hurrying to the western tower.

*Tonight, he thought, I will finally open the gateway.*



A fierce wind swept through Hilt's Rest, the village just outside Calmoren City. Squalls of snow blew across the roadways. Bits of ice littered the wind, whirling around Alek as he rushed to the tower. He shielded his eyes with his hand. A bright light shone from the tower window and blazing bands of red and blue energy crackled and streaked into the sky. Like colored veins of lightning, the flashes of magic power clawed upward, igniting the dark cloud over the tower. A blood-red glow lit the tower, and an iridescent blue haze pulsed on the edges of it.

Alek hoped the unnatural storm over the school was the result of some mischievous apprentices fooling with incantations beyond their

ability. Still, to be safe he drew his sword and joined Oskar at the door.

“Whatever’s happening up there just got worse. Stand aside.” Alek lifted his sword over his head, the handle gripped tightly in both hands. He swung at the door, cutting deep into the wood; but the magic reacted as it did to Oskar, hurling Alek backward with a strong, soundless force. His sword fell into the snow.

Alek shook his head to quiet the ringing in his ears. The power of the spell surprised him. He sprang to his feet, took up his sword, and charged the door, determined to break through. With weapon held high, he delivered a stronger attack, this time leaping up and slicing down. The door split under the cut of his blade; shards of wood erupted around him. A small grin formed on his face. *That felt pretty good.* With the way open, Alek motioned for Oskar to follow him up the tower steps.

The winter storm raged within the building; the biting wind roared down the spiraling stairwell. Ice and shadow covered everything.

“This is powerful magic, indeed,” Alek said. He pulled a cold torch from a nearby mounting and held it toward Oskar. With a subtle gesture of his hand, Oskar ignited the torch’s head. The bright flame lit the stairwell; Alek was glad for the warmth. The two began their ascent. Alek kept the blade tip aimed ahead. The shock of the spell at the door was enough and he would not be surprised again.

As they neared the top floor, Alek heard Darren’s voice from inside the main chamber. “Gateway of Realms, take form in this world and open the next.”

Oskar gasped.

Alek asked, “What is he doing? What is the Gateway of Realms?”

A crash of thunder rumbled the tower.

“It is a legendary conduit to other worlds.”

“How can such a thing exist?”

“I never believed it could. But I’ve also never felt this level of sorcerous energy before. Alek, we must intervene!”

“I’m going in,” Alek said. “Be ready to ward against his magic. I’ve seen what Darren can do with his power.”

Alek kicked the chamber door open, eager to put an end to the chaos and return to The Quiver’n Arrow.

Darren hovered several feet above the floor, blue and red energy coursed around him. His hands balled to fists, glowing with the same power. Alek entered with sword drawn. Darren opened his palms and unleashed a crackling blast of red lightning. The lightning struck the center of the floor, igniting a fiery red portal that turned and hissed. Alek took a step back. The portal appeared gaseous in form, and grew in size. Darren cast more energy into it, stirring the flames of its body

until it nearly filled the room.

Alek felt a pulling sensation grip him. Books and scrolls slid from the shelves, falling to the floor and tumbling toward the portal. He pressed forward, resisting the increasing pull. "Darren," he shouted over the wind and hum of the energy. "Cease this madness. You're endangering us."

Darren regarded Alek with ghostly white eyes. A slow smile spread on his face. "I know what I'm doing, brother. I suggest you leave."

"Not until you dispel this cursed magic!"

Darren lifted higher in the air. Alek worked hard to close the distance between them, his legs burning with the effort. The portal pulled at him. As he made for Darren, he dodged objects flying through the air toward the portal's mouth. Books, inkwells, charts, even desks and chairs raced by him only to be consumed by the gaping, hungry mouth of fire.

Alek glanced over his shoulder to Oskar and hollered, "Do something! It's getting stronger!"

Oskar stepped into the room, his hands surging with white light. The mage hurled a brilliant ball of energy at Darren, who absorbed the attack without making a move.

Alek's leather boots scuffed on the floor. His legs worked hard against the energy that drew him closer to the red portal. Despite his effort, he slid away from Darren, losing to the powerful magic. In his final attempt, he stabbed the tip of his sword into the floor and gripped it for leverage. With a solid hand-hold established, he pushed off, lunging for his brother. Alek found the hem of Darren's robes and clung to it. Anger burned in Darren's eyes. He lifted his body higher and Alek's feet lost contact with the floor. He heard Oskar calling out warnings. Alek held tightly to his brother.

The portal hissed with an insatiable inhale. Darren's hands filled with bright red light. "You cannot overcome my power, brother."

Alek clawed at Darren's garments. The fabric began to tear. "This is madness!"

"No," Darren said. "It is fate." He swung his left hand, striking Alek's face. The blow stunned the warrior and his grip broke. The raging gateway pulled at him with the strength of a swirling storm. His body hurdled through the air, aching as the gripping magic bit into his flesh. His eyes watered from the whipping wind. The roar of the energy was nearly deafening. Oskar leapt for him, snatching him by the wrist. The portal swallowed them, and then closed in a blinding wave of fire.

## Chapter 2



Alek lay on his back, holding his head with both hands to stop the dizziness. Nausea gripped his stomach as he slowly rolled to his side, propping on his elbow. Once his vision cleared, he sat up and brushed the dirt from his face. His body ached from the fall. Under the light of a bright moon, he searched for his friend.

“Oskar, where are you?”

“I’m here, Alek. Although, I’m not sure where ‘here’ is.” The old mage picked up his satchel from the ground beside him and slung it across his chest. With a groan, he rose to his feet.

A dark forest surrounded them. The mossy ground and warm night breeze indicated a different season. Alek chose a large tree and climbed the branches. From the top, he surveyed the land. The large moon painted the world in a soft, silver light. The surrounding forest, though stained in shadow, shimmered as if coated in emerald dust. Mountains, larger than any Alek had ever seen, seemed to sleep with dark clouds lingering over them like puffs of breath. The stony peaks took on a monstrous form against the starlit sky, like the spiny shoulders of resting dragons. After several minutes, he came down.

Oskar asked, “What did you see?”

“The night is bright. There are mountains to the west, and forest stretches around us. But in the east, there was something strange.”

“What?”

“A red light burned in the sky at the horizon. At first, I reasoned it to be the hues of morning: but the light rippled, as would an aurora, then faded to black.” The trees swayed and creaked as their leaves whispered. Shadows danced in the corners of his sight. “This is not Calmoren. What has Darren done?”

Oskar said, “We’ve been cast to another world. How apart from our own, I do not know.”

“Curse him.” Alek’s shoulders slumped and he plopped against the tree to rest his aching back. He huffed, letting the angry air release from his body as the news settled inside him. *How can I undo what my brother has done when I am possibly worlds away? Perhaps Oskar is wrong. This whole place could be a grand illusion or some vivid dream spell.* The thought of dreaming reminded him of how tired he was. A

yawn escaped him and his eyelids drooped. "We must rest. In the morning we'll begin our journey."

"What journey?"

"The journey home."



A cool fog weaved through the forest as gold rays of sunlight burned away the lingering traces of the night. The new day's light shone onto Alek's face, waking him. *I guess this isn't a dream after all.* His eyes lifted upward to find the forest canopy shimmering like a blanket of dewy jewels. He marveled at the size of the trees. They were truly ancient and their looming branches stretched far into the sky. Wherever they were, this land, this forest, was old.

Alek circled the area, looking for a trail or road of any kind. "I hear water," he called to Oskar. "Sounds like a large stream or river."

After a short hike, they came to a rushing river. The water sparkled as it danced over boulders and coursed around downed tree limbs.

Alek knelt at the bank and scooped a handful of water. He brought it to his lips, carefully tasting it. "It's good and cold." They drank and washed their faces.

"I am without my sword," Alek admitted regretfully. How could he have been so careless? "All I have is my dagger and a pouch of fifty pieces. What do you have?"

Oskar opened his satchel. "I've got a few coins, my pouch of tea, some medicinal herbs, a journal, and my spell book."

"We must discover where we are," Alek said. "We're not safe or prepared to hike the wilds of this land." He paused. "This river is a good place to begin gathering resources. Make a camp fire and see if this water yields fish."

"Your motivation is uplifting, my boy. I'll set to work right away. What will you do?" Oskar asked.

"If we are fortunate, we'll catch fish. In the meantime, I'll find branches suitable for a bow and some arrows and take to the woods for other game. Either way, we will not stray from the river unless we're stocked and armed for travel."

The two worked through the morning and into the late afternoon. Oskar caught several fish and cooked them over the fire. Alek fashioned a crude, but effective, bow and a small stock of arrows. He took a pheasant from the woods and prepared the meat. As night wheeled over them, they sat by their fire, warm and sated.

"He actually did it," Oskar muttered.

"You're talking about Darren?" Alek picked the last bits of meat from a seared pheasant leg and licked his fingers.

"Yes. Pragmatically speaking of course, the Gateway of Realms isn't



possible. No one in the Calmoren Order of Mages regards the concept of neighboring realms as a possibility.”

“Tell me more about this gateway. How did my brother come to know of it?”

Oskar’s head hung in shame. “When he was only ten years old, he broke into my school and discovered the Legend of Torea in a book penned by the Elder Mages. Rather than discipline him, I embraced the chance to cultivate his imagination. I explained that the legend was a work of fantasy and served as a companion to a more advanced magical theory.”

Alek picked his teeth with the bone and flung it into the fire. “Go on.”

“You see, long ago, Calmoren’s four Elder Mages wrote that various worlds, like Torea, exist within separate realms. Some of these worlds are near, others far. It is written that realms exist beside one another; however, their perfect alignment prevents one plane of existence from ever knowing the other. This is where the Gateway of Realms comes in—”

“I don’t quite understand,” Alek interrupted. He prodded the fire with a stick, stirring its flame higher. “I was never one for lessons in magic.”

Oskar took out his spell book and handed it to Alek. “Imagine that each page of that book is another world. When the book is closed, the pages touch but do not mix. If you were to bore a hole through the center of the book, you’d be able to touch each page without opening it.”

“So the Gateway of Realms is like that? It touches each world without disturbing the alignment of the realms?”

“Correct, my boy. There is a magical side to you after all.”

“How do you know this is not merely the other edge of our world? Why do you believe we now sit in another realm?”

He pointed to the sky. “The stars, my boy. Can you find any familiar constellations? Where is the Slayer or the the Fathers’ Eye?”

“I . . . I don’t see them.”

“These stars are not the ones that watch over our world. Constellations are seasonal. With that said, in Calmoren, snow bends the boughs and blankets the fields. Here, the sunshine abounds, warming the wind.”

“Do these stars offer you any clue as to what world we are in?” Alek asked.

“No.”

“Then we must try to find a settlement, find people. In the morning, we’ll follow this river upstream. If we do not encounter anyone, we’ll make west for the mountains. At higher ground, we can pan the area

for smoke, lights, or even roads. Get some rest. I'll take first watch over our camp."



Alek kept the fire high as Oskar slept. With his dagger unsheathed, he thought about the mage's words and wondered what they might encounter in this realm. *This land is not so different.* He ran his thumb over the edge of the blade. Alek was about to put away his weapon when a growl rumbled from the shadows.

Alek could not see what it was, as the creature prowled just beyond the campfire's ring of light. Red eyes gleamed. He kept his dagger ready, eyes fixed on the silhouette. The animal skulked around the camp, circling as if trying to find a way around the warrior. Alek heard the stony ground crunching; this told him the creature was heavy, with feet bearing claws. The beast smelled foul, almost like a dog left in the rain. Alek never took his eyes off it.

The firelight reflected from the short blade and Alek saw the teeth moving toward him. He sidestepped, swinging his dagger upward. The steel edge slashed deep into the jaw, sending a spray of blood across the camp. The fire sizzled. The predator let out a terrible groan and recoiled. Alek heard its hurried footfalls racing to the river. He did not follow; he couldn't leave Oskar should other things be lurking near. A splash erupted somewhere in the dark rapids. The beast fled, choosing the swiftness of the water as its escape.

Alek listened to the sounds of the night. All things seemed normal and after some time, he calmed and sat at the fire once more. *Pity that I did not see what it was and a greater pity that it still lives. If only I had a sword.*

In the morning, Alek told Oskar what had happened. The two searched the surrounding riverbank for clues about the animal's identity and origin. Other than large clawed footprints and a trail of blood fading along the water's edge, there was nothing to be found.

They followed the river upstream. The winding waterway led them closer to the range of mountains. Near midday, they came to a stone bridge joining the banks, and a single dirt road. The very sight of the structure filled Alek with hope.

"Now we know there are people here," he declared.

"Yes," agreed Oskar. "And on the road, there are wagon tracks and indentations from horse shoes."

They stayed on the road, venturing west. The heat of the sun rejuvenated Alek, easing away his tension. The bridge and road were like old friends, something familiar at last. He kept his eyes on the edges of the forest and stopped abruptly.

"Listen!" His hand fell to his dagger. "Do you hear that? A horse."

The clapping of horse shoes grew louder behind them. Alek pulled Oskar to the side of the road.

A brown horse carrying an armored soldier came into view. He wore a long gray cloak over his shoulders. The sunlight shined off the edges of his armor. The soldier wore no helmet; his brown hair fell over the clasps of his cloak. As he drew near, Alek noticed he possessed a sword and shield. Large bags and bedrolls clung to the saddle. This inventory told him that the soldier meant to travel or had been traveling a fair distance. Alek placed his weapons at his feet, a sign of peace.

"The last thing we need is for him to think we're bandits." Alek took a knee and pulled Oskar down with him.

The soldier reared his horse to a stop in front of the two. Alek bowed his head, keeping his hands in full view. Oskar remained silent.

"Are you from Oremann?" asked the cloaked man, his hand resting on the pommel of his sword.

Alek glanced at Oskar then replied, "No. We are lost."

"Lost?" the man asked.

"Yes," Alek said. "We're not from this land."

"Then where are you from? Rise and answer, stranger."

Alek could hear the impatience growing in the soldier's voice. He stood up slowly. "We are from the Kingdom of Calmoren and we seek the road that will take us back. Can you help us?"

The man frowned. "I've served in the militia for ten years, and have traveled to every corner of this kingdom, but I have never heard of Calmoren."

He dismounted and approached Alek and Oskar. Alek kept his eyes on the man's weapon.

"My name is Sir Antius Garwin. I am a Knight of Torea Kingdom." The soldier gave a small bow.

Oskar stammered, "Did . . . did you say Torea?"

"That's correct."

"But it seems so peaceful here, so calm."

Sir Garwin chuckled. "Should it be anything but?"

Oskar looked gravely at Alek.

Sir Garwin asked, "What are your names, travelers, and what is your business on the road?"

"My name is Alek and this is Oskar."

"No surnames?"

"Not always. In Calmoren, one name is common; though lineage is honored. Therefore, I am Alek, son of Borlan, sworn warrior to the king and Hall of Fathers."

Oskar cleared his throat. "I am High Mage Oskar of the Calmoren Order of Mages, professor of magical arts and keeper of the School of

Magical. I must say, it is an honor to meet a Knight of Torea.”

Confusion passed across Sir Garwin’s face as he took a moment to assess the two.

Alek figured they resembled vagabonds, Oskar with dirt around his bald head and both of their garments in need of washing. Alek compared himself to Sir Garwin. Though also a warrior, he bore no resemblance to the knight. The Calmoren swordsman stood tall and wide, with stone-like muscles, long blond hair and cool blue eyes. He wore a tunic and leggings of hide with furs around his waist. His tall boots clasped tightly over his calves with steel buckles. Studded leather gauntlets protected his wrists and matched the strap of his empty scabbard. A cloak of scarlet wool hung from his broad shoulders.

Sir Garwin nodded, accepting their introduction. He went back to his horse and mounted. “I will give you a choice: you may continue on your own or accompany me to Oremann Village. I am on official business and cannot delay any further. What will it be, travelers?”

Alek said, “A village would be a welcomed sight, though we do not wish to encumber you or interfere in matters of the kingdom.”

“I wouldn’t invite you if I thought you might interfere,” Sir Garwin assured. “Besides, my business is rather unclear and I may have need of assistance.”

“Assistance?” Alek asked. “With what?”

“I go to Oremann to meet their village cleric. He sent a letter asking for help, though did not specify his trouble. Without knowledge of the problem, King Foss did not wish to send many of his guard. I was dispatched from the outpost at Silt, a riverside town a day’s ride east. Despite whatever troubles wait in Oremann, you’ll be able to rest and restock for the rest of your journey. So, what will you do?”

Oskar nodded his approval. “It would be an honor to join you, Sir Garwin.”

Sir Garwin took up his reins. “Well then, let’s take to the road. Oremann waits.”

The Knight of Torea led the way on horseback while the Calmorens walked several paces behind.

Oskar spoke softly to Alek, “Simply incredible! Can you believe we have come to a place thought to be myth? Despite the inauspicious shift of events we’ve endured, this is all quite exciting. I wonder if the tale of Torea’s fate is true.”

“After seeing what Darren achieved, then tangling with a strange beast, and now greeting a knight of a mythical kingdom, I am ready to name it all truth.”

A dour expression formed on Oskar’s face. “The people of this land are in danger.”

“Then we must hurry and find the way home,” Alek said. “Before we get caught in the demise of a world that is not our own.”

## Chapter 3



warm breeze rolled down the road as the group traveled. The boughs of the trees swayed, murmuring in the wind. The lush forest glowed green with pockets of deep shadows. The distant calls of soaring birds and the rustle of foraging creatures made a tune familiar to Alek. After a few hours, the road met the base of the mountains and wound upward. A wooden post bearing a sign pointed the way: TO OREMANN VILLAGE AND OREMANN MINES.

Alek lifted his gaze beyond the tree line. The mountains of stone parted the clouds with their all-seeing crowns.

"These are the Wrathrock Mountains—older than Torea's line of Kings, protectors of the western boundary. Oremann is a mining town not far from here. A hike up this mountain road will take us to the village gates," Sir Garwin said.

"What is mined in Oremann?" Oskar asked.

"Iron ore mostly. However, several months ago, they found relics of people from long ago. We don't know who these ancient settlers were, but artifacts like pottery, tools, and even weapons were uncovered. King Foss sent scholars to study the findings."

Oskar mumbled, "Might be relics of Everheart."

Sir Garwin stepped in front of Oskar. "What did you say?"

"Oh, I was guessing that the artifacts might be from the ancient people of Everheart."

Sir Garwin's face hardened. "I do not know of whom you speak. Like Calmoren, I've never heard of Everheart. I've accepted that you are not from Torea. But I will not be made to feel ignorant."

Alek put his hand on Oskar's shoulder and pulled him back. "Sir Garwin, my old friend means no disrespect. He is well versed in bardic tales, that is all. Surely the good people of Torea enjoy their own stories of fantasy."

Garwin's demeanor softened. "Yes. I understand."

"My apologies if I've upset you, good knight." Oskar gave a courteous nod.

Alek asked Garwin, "What was determined at the site in the mines?"

"Further excavation revealed it was a grave, but for one."

“Only one?”

“Yes. A single tomb was discovered,” Sir Garwin answered. “The miners refused to work until a decision arrived from the king regarding how to handle it. While deliberating over the issue, the letter from the cleric arrived. We’ve received no word from Oremann for some time now.”



Oremann Village was smaller than Alek imagined. The road into town stopped in the village common. No other roadways came in or out. Smooth rock faces and jutting cliffs towered over the settlement, casting shadows on the stone houses below. Shuttered windows and wooden doors adorned each square home. As Alek entered the town, he noticed a veil of quiet hanging over the community.

Alek panned the area. A narrow staircase, made from slabs of rock, stretched up the mountainside, leading to a chapel that overlooked the village, next to which opened the dark mouth of a mine.

Sir Garwin dismounted at the Oremann Tavern. He tethered his horse to the wooden rails, and then motioned for Alek and Oskar to follow him inside.

“Greetings,” he called. “Is anyone here?”

A layer of dust covered the tables. Mugs and dishes lay strewn about the floor, glass from the windows crunched under their boots. The ashes in the hearth were cold. Alek meandered to a broken window and eyed the village center. A large communal well sat in the middle of the common, its bucket hanging from the line, dry and empty. Something strange caught his eye: the ground outside was tinged with red.

Alek made his way to the bar for food and drink. He found a warm bottle of ale and a basket of stale bread. “Better than nothing.” He tossed a loaf to Oskar then sat at one of the few upright tables and took a bite. “Not much to see in Oremann, I suppose,” he said, his mouth full of crunchy bread. “I’d wager raiders sacked this place.”

Sir Garwin sat across from Alek. “It saddens me to find Oremann this way. This town is usually quite lively. Children playing in the common, miners drinking here in the tavern, the chapel bell tolling the hour.”

Alek took a gulp of warm ale then asked, “It appears no one has been here for several weeks. Did your orders offer any information as to what hardship plagued this town?”

“I’ll show you the letter.” Garwin opened a small leather satchel on his belt and produced a red envelope.

Alek opened it and read the looping penmanship.

To the King's Council,  
from First Cleric Roland Alborn of Oremann,

It is in dire need that I write this letter requesting the aid of the royal forces. A terrible, unholy occurrence has fallen over Oremann. I do not dare pen the details for fear of prompting chaos throughout should this letter fall into hands unintended. Know that the need for help against this terror is great. Please hurry.

R. A.

"Vague," Alek remarked, "but serious."

Sir Garwin took back the letter. "I wish I knew what happened to the Oremann people."

A voice from the tavern entrance said, "Most are dead; those who live, likely wish they were."

Alek saw a man clad in green and gold-trimmed robes enter the room. His rusty red hair fell below his ears and his hazel eyes looked the group over with a shine of relief.

"Welcome, friends. My name is Roland Alborn, First Cleric and son of Oremann." He took a knee before Sir Garwin, bowing his head. "Thank you for answering my call."

"Rise, Cleric Alborn," commanded Sir Garwin.

"You may call me Roland."

"Very well, Roland. Tell us what goes on here."

Roland leaned out a nearby window and checked the road and sky. Alek noticed the cleric nervously wringing his hands. "Follow me to the chapel," Roland said. "I feel it's safer for us there. I have fresh food and clean beds that you are welcome to use. I'll tell you everything."



Oskar's knees trembled as Roland led the three up the stone stairs to the chapel. His old legs were sore and tired from all the hiking. Candles lit the main hall and the steps to the lower chambers.

"Welcome to my home, the Chapel of Zo'ah," said Roland.

The three sat in soft chairs around a table. Roland poured each man a cup of tea and provided a basket of fruit. Oskar leaned back in his chair, enjoying the rest and the cleric's hospitality.

"Forgive my ignorance, good cleric. I am a foreigner, unwise to your culture. Tell me, who is Zo'ah?" Oskar asked, sipping his tea.

Roland nodded. "Zo'ah is the goddess of wood and stone. She gave humanity the ingenuity to craft with trees and rocks. She gave us wisdom. Here, in Oremann, we pray to her as we mine the mountain. She protects us. Now, however, I am not certain if what has come to



pass was brought about by her wrath—”

Sir Garwin interrupted, “Tell me what’s happened here.”

Roland recounted the recent ordeal. “It all started with the dreams. Shortly after the miners uncovered the ancient tomb, my nights became restless.

“I dreamed of a woman, with hair as dark as a raven’s wing, dressed in a corseted black gown. The dream was always the same; by the light of the moon she’d stand at the entrance to the mine, beckoning me to follow her inside. Her beautiful face and seductive movements would enchant me and I’d go to her. As I draw near, she slips into the darkness of the mine and I lose sight of her. Something tells me not to follow but after a few minutes of waiting alone in the night, I hear her voice calling to me for help. She’s trapped, she cannot breathe, and I am the only one around to save her.”

Roland paused and ran a trembling hand through his hair. “I told no one of these dreams. Then, two weeks ago, I sat up in my bed with a cold brow and racing heart. The moonlight poured through my window and a strong breeze chilled me. I got up to close the window but found myself staring out at the mine. I heard her then, calling for help. Like a whisper on the wind, her mournful cries sounded so real. I hurried outside and went to the mine. With a lantern in hand, I followed the sound of her sobs deep into the lower levels. ”

“Where did these cries lead you?” Sir Garwin asked.

“Right to the tomb. The smooth stone casing and bands of steel shined under my lantern’s light. I brushed some loose dirt from the lid and heard her inside, begging me to help her. I took up a pick axe, broke open the heavy lid, and found her body lying still within.”

“A corpse. Where is it now?” Alek asked.

Roland shook his head. “It was not a corpse that I found, Alek. She was perfectly beautiful as though only asleep.”

Oskar felt the warmth leave his face and his heart sink. The events told in the Legend of Torea had begun. He took a deep breath to steady his nerves.

“As I leaned close to examine her,” Roland continued, “she opened her eyes. A strange green light shone from them, lighting the interior of the mine. Her body lifted from the coffin, floating on the air as if weightless. She looked down at me, gave a sinister smile, then opened her arms and unleashed a forceful blast of what I can only describe as soundless lightning. I was thrown backward.”

Oskar remembered the powerful force that sealed his tower door.

“The woman,” Roland said, “lowered herself to the ground and ran her fingers along the edge of her tomb. She came to me and examined my robes. ‘You are a man of power here?’ she asked.

“I shook my head and replied, ‘I am a devout of Zo’ah, nothing

more.'

"She scoffed. 'I shall give you a new name to worship. I am Lorelei, sorceress of the black arts of Everheart. You have freed me from my prison; for this, I will spare your life and offer you the chance to kneel. Accept me as your ruler.'"

"I held my ground against her and answered, 'The people here are loyal to the King of Torea and faithful to our pantheon of gods and goddesses. I will not kneel and dishonor this kingdom or my creators.' I prayed aloud, hoping the gods would hear me and grant me the power to return this witch to her tomb. Lorelei only laughed and flew out of the mine. I ran after her.

"The sun rose over the village. Lorelei hovered above the common and called to the townsfolk. They came out from their homes and looked on in fear as she evoked a black cloud. The cloud bloomed over the village, and from it poured a red rain. I ran into the chapel and watched from the window. Men and women fell to the mud, burning under Lorelei's terrible storm. It was then that they began to transform, mutating into horrific creatures. Men and women cried in agony as their bodies contorted and refigured into beings that I can only describe as something like wolf and lion combined. Each creature reared nearly seven feet with thick red fur, a protruding jaw filled with deadly teeth, and long claws more menacing than a fist full of knives.

"Lorelei lifted higher into the air, the black cloud swirling around her. She saw me in my chapel window and shouted over the cries of the town, 'Hear my vow and warn your kingdom. I, Lorelei, will take control of this land piece by piece. All who oppose me shall become my beasts or die by my magic.' In a flash of light, she disappeared.

"I barricaded the chapel doors. The screams of the remaining villagers filled the air as the monsters feasted on them. The red rain fell on the town for the rest of the morning. By early afternoon, the shifting wind pulled away the awful storm.

"Since this tragedy, I have remained in my chapel waiting for help. I am the last survivor of Oremann Village."

The group sat in silence for several long minutes. Oskar saw no deception in Roland and believed his account.

Sir Garwin rose from his chair and paced the room. "What you're saying sounds fantastical, Roland. But this does not negate the fact that an entire settlement is no more. The mines of Oremann provided valuable resources to Torea Kingdom and without its people, Torea will suffer. The king must be informed that his people have been slain and the kingdom is threatened. Will you accompany me to the river city of Silt? There, I can properly inform my commander."

"Though I love Oremann, I would finally find rest in Silt," Roland

answered.

Garwin said to Alek and Oskar. "We'll spend the night here. In the morning, we'll gather provisions and take to the road before the centering of the sun. Now, Alek, Oskar, may I speak to you in private?"

The three left Roland's chamber and met in the chapel hall. Oskar took a moment to admire a marble statue of the goddess Zo'ah. Her robes rippled over her arms and wrapped around her legs. Her elegant figure leaned on a tall staff of knotted wood.

Garwin turned to Oskar, "Roland said a familiar word, 'Everheart.' You voiced the same word earlier. What is it and how do you know of it? I want to know exactly who you are."

Alek approached the knight, no longer heeding the warrior's code of honor. He faced Garwin, chest bowed and fists clenched. "You will not speak to Oskar in such a manner. Do you suspect that we are enemies of this kingdom? I hear the accent of accusation in your voice."

Oskar drew in a disappointed breath, recalling the dozens of boyhood fights he'd pulled Alek from long ago. This was no different. Though the scrapping boy had become an expert warrior, self-control was still a developing skill.

*I'm getting too old for this kind of thing*, he thought. Oskar stepped between the two and tried to separate them. "Alek, be calm. Now is not the time to quarrel."

Alek glared at Oskar and said through gritted teeth, "Stand aside."

Oskar knew that Alek would not stop now. He could only hope the young warrior would keep his temper well enough not to harm the knight. He shuffled back and resorted to watching from the pew a few feet away.

"I am a proud warrior of Calmoren Kingdom and as I stand here, explaining myself to you, a great threat looms over my home. I will find a way to return to Calmoren and save my people, with or without the consent of Torea," Alek said.

Oskar put his head in his hands and muttered his frustration.

Garwin stepped closer to Alek. "You attest to be from a land I've never heard of. I know every kingdom, every continent, and Calmoren is not one of them."

"You don't understand, Sir Garwin," Alek said. "We come from another realm entirely."

"That is preposterous!"

"Do you believe my words are lies?" Alek's face reddened.

"And what if I do?"

To Oskar's dismay, Alek struck the knight. Garwin fell hard on the chapel floor, his armor clanking. He climbed back to his feet and wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth.

“No one strikes a Knight of Torea without consequence!” He drew his sword.

Alek rushed in as Garwin side-swung his blade. Like a hungry lion, Alek leapt over the attack, pouncing down on the knight. The two rolled around on the floor exchanging strikes.

Oskar had seen enough. He rolled his sleeves to his elbows and opened his palms, conjuring a bright blue ball of icy energy. He rolled the cold orb of light in his hands, waiting for the right moment to release it.

Alek and Garwin broke from each other and took to their feet once more. Garwin wiped the blood from his mouth and Alek spat a red glob on the floor. They rushed for one another again, but Oskar let loose the cold ball. In a flash of blue, a smooth layer of ice crystallized under the two warriors. Alek and Garwin slipped and fell, landing hard on their backsides. Oskar refused to hide his smirk. With a small wave of his hand, the ice disappeared and the old mage extended his hands to help them up.

Oskar continued, “As I was saying, now is not the time. Sir Garwin, I will gladly answer your questions and tell you all I know of Everheart and Torea. There is much that your king needs to hear.”

Garwin nodded. “Thank you, Oskar.” He faced Alek with an outstretched hand.

Alek accepted, a small smile on his face. “You fight well, knight.”



he woke on a soft bed of purple silk. A few slender candles cast a trembling radiance around her. She knew this room—her chamber from many years ago, lifetimes ago. Now, only moss and spider webs served as décor.

“Welcome back.” His voice echoed off the stone walls. The shadows hanging under his hood hid his face. Only the sharp angles of his jaw and thin lips could be seen. “How are you feeling?”

She felt tired, so very tired, but as her memories gathered, so did her strength. She sat up. “Who are you?”

The man stepped into the candle light. He drew back his hood. Locks of curling blond hair fell over his shoulders. His eyes flashed with red light. “My name is Darren, Lord of Realms.”

“You freed me?”

“No. I sent you the power you needed to rise. Do you know where you are?”

She looked around. “This is my chamber, in the tower of Fall Hollow Keep. The keep, and the village of Fall Hollow, was destroyed when—”

“When you were overtaken by the Knights of Everheart and imprisoned.”

“How do you know about that?”

He did not reply.

Memories fluttered in her mind like startled birds. She saw parts of one, fragments of another— a rising castle standing high over a sprawling city, a village knotted among a dense forest, a moss covered fortress. Then she remembered the light. So bright, so painful. She couldn’t move.

The memory quieted when she felt a sharp pain in her hands. She had dug her nails into her palms. Blood trickled over her knuckles.

“How is it that I find myself here, that this place exists once more?”

“Nothing can ever truly be gone as long as there is someone to remember. But it takes someone who can peer into your heart and manifest those memories; someone with power immeasurable. I found you while you stood atop the Wrathrock Mountains surveying the land over Oremann. It was easy to recreate this memory and drop it around

you.” His thin lips curled. “As easy as catching a spider in a jar.”

He sat at the edge of her bed and reached to brush her hair. She recoiled and slashed at his face with sharp fingernails. Her strike split his cheek. He laughed softly as the small wound healed itself. His eyes flashed again and she could not move, pinned to the bed. “Do not fight me. I do not wish to harm you, Lorelei.”

“What do you want from me?”

The back of his hand caressed her jaw line and down to the base of her neck. She trembled from his touch, so cold yet tingling with residual magic.

“It’s more of what you might want from me. You’ve been imprisoned for too long. Though you claimed Oremann, it took all of your power, plus the power I sent you. You have nothing left. I can make you powerful again, so powerful that you can be a god like me.”

She scoffed. “You are no god.”

“Perhaps a demonstration of my power? Behold!” He aimed an open hand across the room. Brilliant bursts of red and blue intertwining light shot from his fingertips and pooled on the floor. A crackling portal emerged, swirling and hissing as if alive.

Lorelei shielded her eyes from the intense light. Never before had she witnessed this type of magic.

“This is the Gateway of Realms. It is mine to command. With it, I can traverse endless worlds.” He closed his hand, the gateway vanished, leaving the ground where it burned glowing like embers in a hearth. “So you see? I am indeed a god, and the worst kind—a conqueror.” He released his magical grip on her.

Lorelei climbed out of bed, wearing only a thin gown of black silk. She stood before him, staring into his eyes. “Surely there is a price for your power; what if I refuse to pay it?”

“All I ask is your affection.” He pulled her to him. His lips lingered over hers. Long had it been that she was held this way. She breathed in his scent and it was of smoke and ash, musky incense and strange herbs. She felt his lean, strong frame pressed against her, his boney hands feeling like the talons of a deadly hawk. There was no escaping his embrace and she wasn’t sure if she wanted to leave it.

He whispered, “My power for your devotion. Together we’ll claim world after world.”

“Or?”

“Or I’ll take whatever power remains in you, return you to your tomb, and rule this world myself.”

“Out of all the endless worlds, why have you chosen me?”

“Why not you?”

She pressed her lips to his. In that moment, a surge of intoxicating magic swelled within her core. The energy was unlike anything she

had ever felt—scorching and freezing at the same time, pleasurable but tinged with a subtle venom.

## Chapter 4

The group spent the night in the Chapel of Zo'ah. Alek listened to

Oskar recount the Legend of Torea. It reminded him of his brother Darren. His thoughts darkened. He noticed the shock in Roland and Garwin's faces as they listened to a poem about their home as it is known to another land, in another realm. He understood their astonishment. He felt the same way when he learned he had been sent to Torea.

"Everheart was a kingdom that existed before Torea and her people?" Sir Garwin asked.

Oskar nodded. "According to the legend we know, yes."

"Lorelei called herself sorceress of the black arts of Everheart. There are no settlements in the east. It's barren out there, nothing but fields of stone, tumbling rock valleys and the skeletons of ancient trees."

"Perhaps in her time," Oskar replied, "the eastern land of Torea was different. It might have been where the central city of Everheart once stood."

Roland whispered a short prayer to Zo'ah, then said to Alek and Oskar, "It is a miracle that you two have come. The legend from your world foretells a terrible fate for us. But now, with your knowledge, we can take measures to alter our future."

Alek paced the room as he considered the severity of their situation. Instinctively, his hands shifted his baldric. Its light weight reminded him that he was without a sword. He asked, "How will we succeed, armed as we are? We need greater weapons and more warriors to wield them."

Oskar's eyes widened. "Greater weapons . . . precisely! The Everblade. 'The sword of true might, the Everblade, absorbed all the witch's attacks.' We must find it." He said to Alek, "My boy, you can wield a sword better than anyone."

Alek glanced to Sir Garwin and sent him a confident half-grin then replied, "If the Everblade exists, and it has the power to absorb dark magic, then Darren will fall from its cut as well." He stretched his arms and gave a yawn. "I've had enough talk for this night. Rest well, friends."

As Alek left, he bumped his shoulder against Sir Garwin's, knocking



the knight aside.



The journey began just after sunrise. Alek helped Roland load a traveling pack with smoked meats, pickled eggs, medicinal herbs, and skins of water. The group met at the Oremann stables, and each man took a horse.

Alek said, "Surely a mining town has a forge. With a sword and shield, I will rest easier."

"Yes," replied Roland. "The forge of Oremann glowed hot all hours of the day and night. Come, I'll take you there. I'm sure you'll find suitable arms racked in the workroom."

Alek followed Roland while the others readied the horses for travel. The blacksmith's forge was cold and tools lay strewn about the workroom. Alek could almost hear the clashing of the craftsman's hammer against fiery, orange lengths of steel. The lingering scent of raw iron reminded him of boyhood days spent observing the smiths of Calmoren cut, bend, and hammer metal into breastplates, shields, and weapons. Against the far wall, hung a tall rack adorned with various swords, daggers, bucklers, and shields. Alek's hand clasped the cold handle of a sword. He lifted it off the rack with great care, and remembered the day he first held a real sword.

He was eight years old when his father, Borlan, took him to the Calmoren forge. The summer sun had just begun to burn away the morning dew and a soft fog trailed around the corners of the town. Though early, the smith was hard at work; the hammer falls chimed louder than chapel bells. His father called, "Greetings, Adam. I received a letter from the courier stating that my sword is ready."

The smith dropped his hammer and threw down his leather gloves. "Ready and waiting, Borlan. Just a moment. I'll get it."

The smith went to a tall rack and lifted a sword wrapped in fur. Borlan received it and carefully removed the covering. Alek was awestruck as his father's strong hand withdrew a gleaming silver sword. The blade shined in the rays of morning sunlight. Alek squinted.

"Stand aside, boy," Borlan said. Alek backed away as his father swung the sword over his shoulder, around his head and out in front to slice the air with a swooping rush of wind. A soft metallic hum rang from the blade as Borlan slid it into his scabbard.

"This is a fine sword," his father said.

Borlan and Alek left the smith and made their way up the road through the village common. Alek could not contain his excitement. "Father, may I hold your sword?"

Borlan stopped and knelt next to Alek. "Very well. But you must be

careful. It's much heavier than the wooden swords you've been training with."

"I will be very careful."

Borlan clutched his scabbard and pulled the sword free. He held it out for Alek, resting the blade over his forearm. "Do not touch the blade. The oil from your fingers can tarnish it. Always lift from the handle. You may need two hands."

Alek reached with one hand and lifted the sword. He nearly dropped it but focused his strength and, with a determined grunt, held the weapon high over his head. He moved his feet to keep his balance as he aimed the sword to the sky. The pink hues of morning reflected in the blade.

"How's this, Father?"

"You're ready for battle, son."

"Do I look like you?"

Borlan nodded. "Indeed you do."

Alek lowered the sword and held it out in front of him, just as his father had. "Good. Because that's what I want."



Remembering his father, Alek swung the Oremann blade over his shoulder, around his head and out in front, slicing the air with the same rush of wind. *This is a fine sword.*

Next, Alek chose a round iron shield, padded with fur and laced with sturdy leather straps. He always preferred rounded shields because they did not have edges that might catch on garments or armor in battle. The shield's smooth face distorted Alek's reflection. He tried the fit, sliding his left arm through the inner belting and clenching the contoured handle. The shield's body covered his entire arm, shoulder and torso side. With sword poised in his right hand and the shield closing his front, he remained battle-ready and moved around the room with sure steps. Simulating combat, he swung the sword up, down, side-to-side and out for a kill.

Oskar and Garwin entered the workroom. Oskar smiled at the warrior with sword and shield. Garwin's jaw hung.

Alek delivered a final attack, leaping high into the air and falling with blade tip down. The sword pierced the heart of a breastplate lying on the ground. He withdrew the blade and wiped the sweat from his brow. "Been standing there long?"

"Long enough to be glad you're on our side. The Oremann swords are quite powerful," Sir Garwin replied.

Alek stepped up to Garwin. "Do you know what the strongest part of the sword is?"

Garwin didn't answer.

“The hand that wields it. Remember that.”  
Garwin nodded. “I will. Now it’s time to go.”



The sun lifted over the surrounding forest, illuminating the stony road. The clapping of their horses’ shoes stirred the birds from the canopy.

Sir Garwin led them east along the Laughing River. He called out to the others, “This road will take us to the riverside town of Silt. It’s a village fortified by the royal militia. There, I can make an official report of our situation. If we ride fast, we could arrive before nightfall. The militia outpost will welcome us.”

Alek asked, “Are there other knights of your order stationed there?”

“Yes, and they’ll be able to protect the people of Silt from Lorelei, or any danger for that matter.”

“You sound confident, Garwin.”

“I say, let her come,” challenged the knight. “I’ll be the one who mounts her head on the battlements of Castle Torea!”

The shrill cry of a raven echoed overhead. Its beating wings rustled the branches of the canopy as it flew above the trail.

Oskar gasped. “That bird, its call is that of the raven but its body lacks the black sheen. It’s scarlet.”

Alek commanded his horse to a halt. The red raven flapped and circled the group. “Is that winged one native to this world?”

Garwin said, “I’ve never seen a raven feathered like that.”

Alek dismounted and took up his hand-crafted bow. All of the grim accounts of the witch, his encounter with the beast along the river, and the turning of his brother, had put him in a mood for battle. If this raven was from her, then it would come down. With arrow nocked, string drawn, and hands steady, he followed the raven’s path of flight. The bowstring let out a twang as the arrow soared. In seconds, the raven’s body lay still on the road.

They approached the still creature. Oskar warned them to be cautious. Garwin stood over the scarlet raven and nudged it with the tip of his boot. He jumped back when the bird’s head rolled and faced him.

In shock, Alek stepped back as the dead raven’s beak cracked open. Its tongue lolled loosely as it spoke. “Let her come.” The raven’s voice cracked and a slow hiss escaped its throat. “Let . . . her . . . come . . .”

Garwin growled and kicked the carcass into the brambles at the edge of the road.

“She’s near. I can feel her power,” Oskar said.

Alek ordered, “Mount up. We’re safer if we’re moving.” He kept his eyes on the sky and treetops. The red raven unsettled him, but he

refused to let his concern show in his face. He wondered what else waited for them in this land. As his horse trotted, he felt the sword bouncing against his back—a trusted companion. *Now I'm ready*, he thought. He nudged his horse with his heels, urging it to a gallop.



Garwin led the group east throughout the day, stopping only twice to rest at the bank of the Laughing River. The raven's eerie voice rang in his ears like a ghostly echo while the poem of Torea's ill fate paced the corridors of his mind. Urgency welled in his heart, fanning his concern for his kingdom to a flame.

The horses drank the cold river's water and grazed on low-lying vegetation. Roland distributed the jar of pickled eggs. As the sun rolled down the western peaks of the Wrathrock Mountains, great shadows stretched over the river, the road, and the surrounding forest. They continued their ride to Silt, with nighttime chasing their heels.

The wooden gates of Silt were thick pillars fashioned from tree trunks. A knight, dressed like Garwin, guarded the village gates. On a scaffold battlement above, paced two more guardsmen armed with bow and arrows. Garwin stopped his horse.

The knight greeted him, "Hail, Sir Garwin. Welcome back, and with a party I see."

Garwin dismounted and met his fellow knight with a firm handshake. "I've had the fortune of meeting worthy allies. I bring also Oremann's First Cleric, Roland Alborn."

The knight shook the hands of Alek and Oskar, and then bowed respectfully to Roland. He turned to Garwin. "Leave your horses; I'll have the stable keep take care of them. Why don't you all have a meal at the inn? Knights, and those sworn to their service, always eat for free, you know."

Sir Garwin replied, "We'll enjoy Silt's hospitality later, brother. Now, we must report to the outpost commander."

"I understand," the knight replied. "It's always duty first with you, Garwin." He called for the men on the scaffold to open the gates.

Silt was lively with people. Though night was falling, children still ran carefree about the main roadway. Some chased each other, others play-fought with stick swords and twine bows. Clay bricks and beams of wood formed the many houses of Silt; the windows of each glowed with firelight.

Bright lanterns adorned wooden pillars standing along the edges of the road. Under the lights, signs dangled indicating the names of the shops and the inn. Just as Oremann was home to a deep mine, Silt boasted several large waterwheels that powered the various mechanical devices that the town relied on. Great wheels mounted to

grain mills, conveyor belts and gears revolved from the river's unending flow. This motion allowed for efficient laboring and production of food and materials in the many workshops of the village.

They came to a stone block building. The banner of Torea Kingdom hung over the doorway and another swayed from a tall pole on the roof. A blazing gold sun with sharp rays dominated the center of the dark blue flag. Beneath the sun, a constellation of seven stars formed a downward 'v.' Six of the seven stars shimmered in silver while the bottom star gleamed as gold as the sun.

Sir Garwin noticed Alek and Oskar admiring the royal banners. He took a moment to explain the significance of Torea's crest.

"Blue is for loyalty, gold represents generosity, and silver means peace. The people of Torea Kingdom honor the east; it is where tomorrows are imagined and the future is born. The great sun reminds us of this. The seven stars represent the seven cities of Torea, the gold star being Torea City, where Castle Torea stands."

Alek smiled. "I like it."

The sight of the royal banner always filled Garwin's heart with pride. He looked to the group and said, "When it comes to reporting the ordeal in Oremann to the commander, let me do the talking. I wish only to provide facts, you see; and I'd like to avoid the talk of dark magic and the witch to start. Agreed?"

"We must not make light of this horror. The Royal Militia needs to know so they can act swiftly against Lorelei," Roland said.

Garwin said, "Worry not, friend. We will avenge the good people of Oremann. But please, let me address this matter the proper way."



The hall of the outpost was bright with lantern and candlelight. Torea knights meandered about the building while a few sat in chairs beside a roaring hearth. Some talked of past battles, others of new royal decrees.

Garwin noticed the commander approaching and bowed his head to honor him. He made the introduction as the commander eyed the group. "It is my honor to introduce Outpost Commander Tarl Fathion."

Commander Fathion stood proud with his hands behind his back. The deep lines in his face foretold his age, as did the stripes of gray hair above his ears. Though appearing weathered from a life of service, a brilliance remained in his greenish-blue eyes—a warrior still capable of wielding his sword. He gave a noble bow to the group. The others did the same. He spoke to Oskar and Alek, "You two are visitors to Torea Kingdom?"

“That’s correct, Commander. It has been a distinct pleasure and privilege to travel this beautiful land,” Oskar replied.

“I appreciate your sentiment.” The commander faced Roland. “Ah, First Cleric Albourn. I recall the letter you penned asking for help. Why is it that your presence here seems indicative of ill tidings?”

Roland glanced to Garwin, who interjected. “Sir, there is grave news regarding Oremann. May I suggest we all discuss this elsewhere? I wish to offer an official report.”

“Of course, follow me.”

Commander Fathion led the men to his chamber at the far corner of the building. The center fireplace sat dark and cold, but several oil lamps filled the room with a warm light. The group sat at a round table; the commander closed the door. “Sir Garwin, do you wish for this meeting to serve as your formal report to the powers of royal authority?”

“I do.”

The commander removed an elegantly painted shield from the wall and placed it on the table. The face bore the kingdom crest. “Will you speak now by the honor of the shield of Torea and with truth to King Yolfere Foss?”

Sir Garwin reached across the table and placed his hand on the shield. “By honor and with truth.”

“You may proceed with your report.”

Garwin cleared his throat and recounted the ordeal suffered in Oremann. He explained how he came upon Oskar and Alek, and then ended his report with a summation of Lorelei.

“To conclude, I state that this enemy is one who wields powerful magic. It is this magic that caused the ruin of Oremann.”

Commander Fathion paced the room. “I will write your statement, as I’ve heard it, and send it by guarded courier to the royal council at Castle Torea. I suggest that you, Garwin, also ride to Castle Torea to field any questions the council may have. This matter will reach the ears of the king and I want you there, should he call on you.” Commander Fathion turned back to Roland. “First Cleric, you’ve suffered a great deal of loss and it’s one of my sworn duties to attend to the needs of the devout. What comforts can I provide here in Silt? I am at your service.”

“Thank you, Commander. I am well enough. My new allies,” he pointed to Oskar and Alek, “give me comfort. I believe they can help us against this evil.”

“Is that so?” the commander asked.

“What he means,” Alek added, “is that I am also a man of arms and would be proud to offer my sword in service to your kingdom.”

Oskar placed a hand on Alek’s shoulder. “I will fight for Torea as

well.”

The commander studied the old man. “What might a man of your age do in battle?”

Oskar spun around to face the cold fireplace; his white robes swirled as he outstretched his arms. His palms snapped open and a stream of fire blazed forth, igniting the dry logs. The heat and brilliance of the fiery blast made the commander shield his face.

Sir Garwin was astounded. “Impressive. I never imagined such power could come from a man as . . .,” he paused, searching for right words.

Oskar assisted, “Old as I?”

Sir Garwin rubbed the back of his neck and shrugged.

Oskar patted him on the shoulder. “No offense taken. I’m like a tree. The older I get, the stronger I become.” He faced the commander, palms glowing with red magic. “Would you like a larger demonstration?”

The commander took a step back. “That won’t be necessary.” He wiped the sweat from his brow.

## Chapter 5



skar sat at the feasting table. A spread of meat, rolls, and vegetables waited on silver platters. A pretty serving lady rounded the table pouring cold ale and then returned with hot stew. Oskar began eating, snatching up several rolls for his stew. A cold wind blew through the open window.

Roland said, "I'm grateful to you all." He placed a hand on Garwin's shoulder. "Thank you for your belief in me."

"Will you stay in Silt, or join us south to Torea City?"

"As much as I'd love to visit the royal city," Roland said, "I think it's best if I remain here. I'd like to organize a service of last rights for the lost people of Oremann."

"As you wish." Garwin took up a spoon and drew his bowl of stew near.

The rumble of thunder broke overhead sounding like the rolling beat of a distant war drum. Oskar scurried to the window. Rain poured from the dark sky. A flash of lightning illuminated the window sill. He heard the rhythm of potent magic echoing in the hollow of the coming storm. He lit his palms with crackling energy. Alek followed, brandishing his blade. A roar bellowed in the storm.

"That sound! It's the creatures of the witch," Roland said in a shaky voice.

Garwin ordered Roland, "Hurry. Alert the knights and the commander. I'm going out to meet these monsters."

Garwin climbed onto the window ledge and leapt outside into the rainy night. Oskar hurried after him, bounding from the open window with Alek close behind. Oskar was thankful the window wasn't a high drop. When he landed, his feet complained but he stood firm against the muddy road.

Garwin raced to the center of town. His silver armor dripped with rainwater. Oskar caught up with him when he stopped to survey the dimly lit roads.

"The outpost is the most secure building. We should have the people go there at once," Alek said.

"Good," agreed Garwin. "Do what you can to inform them. I'll hold position here."



Alek motioned to Oskar. "Help me warn the people. You take one side of town, I'll take the other."

Oskar nodded, and the two separated.



Alek heard the shattering of glass and splintering of wood. He hurried down the dark streets, following the sounds. At the tavern, the door lay broken; debris littered the road. Screams and growls came from within—the swordsman wasted no time.

Alek entered the tavern to find a large, reddish-brown furred beast, the height of a man, gripping a woman by the throat. It bore claws like blackened steel, and lifted the woman off her feet. She kicked and writhed as she choked for air. Alek charged in, sword aloft, and leapt into an attack while he had the monster's back. His blade struck true, sinking deep into the furred creature's torso, breaking through its chest. The woman fell to her knees. The beast let out a horrible cry then fell forward, blood pooling under its rusty fur.

The tavern people cowered under tables and clung to one another in fear. Alek shouted, "Go to the outpost; warn others if you can!" He reached for the woman and helped her to her feet. "Are you well enough?"

"I think so," she answered, trembling. "Thank you."

Another roar sounded from somewhere in the town. "Go," Alek ordered. The woman ran from the tavern, following the others.

Alek rolled the beast over to study its face. Never, in all of his days in battle, had he beheld anything like this. Wide yellow eyes, very much like those of a panther, stared lifelessly at him. Its muzzle was elongated, as would befit a wolf. Its mouth bore four long white fangs set among a top and bottom row of pointed teeth. The muscle structure and proportions of the arms and legs appeared human.

When Alek looked once more at the hands, it wasn't the deadly claws that caught his eye. A ring adorned the beast's finger. He knelt down and examined it. "A wedding band," he whispered. "You were human." He bowed his head to respect the life that he had no choice but to take, then took up his sword and left the tavern.

Alek ran to the homes and shouted warnings into windows. The rain drenched his hair and saturated his red cloak. The road thickened with mud, slowing the warrior's stride as he rallied the townsfolk to take refuge in the outpost. A raspy growl taunted him from a rooftop. Perched on the gable of a large home, a beast flashed his claws and jumped down to the road in front of him. Its yellow eyes narrowed on him as it charged. Alek readied for the attack; his shield raised and his sword angled for offense. Black claws streaked at him, fast and feral. The shield met the slash, the metal shrieked as the claws scraped the

surface.

Alek recoiled from the impact, then sprang forward, bashing the attacker's face with the shield. It groaned as it staggered back, stunned. Thunder clashed overhead, lightning lit the town for only a second; long enough for Alek to drive his sword into its throat. Alek shoved his left boot against the beast's chest, pulling free his blade and knocking the corpse down to the mud. He looked at the deep gouges cut into the face of his shield. *No weapons of man can mar a shield as badly. One strike from these animals will end a warrior's days.*

Just then, Garwin's voice called out, "Come for me, wretched ones!" Alek hurried for the town center.



"To the outpost!" Oskar hollered. He ran down the opposite end of town and had warned several families of the danger breaking out in the night. Fathers carried their children and guided their wives across the rain-swept roads. Oskar waved them on, his heart hammering in his chest. He shivered in his wet robes but pressed on. The sound of clanking armor rang out in the night as the Knights of Torea moved through the town with torches in hand, leading the people to safety. Oskar sighed in relief to see the lines of armed men, with swords and spears drawn.

Roars echoed all around. Oskar heard the scuffling of clawed feet on the rooftops. From behind the homes, he heard the creatures trampling through puddles and breaking into houses. With no more homes to warn, Oskar started back for the town center, following Garwin's voice shouting over the storm, taunting the hungry beasts.

Oskar wiped at the rainwater streaming down his bald head and into his eyes. He rounded a corner and stopped to catch his breath. He noticed one of the vicious creatures bounding for a group of unaware knights. It pounced, claws wide. Oskar aimed his open palms and blasted it with two streams of white lightning. The magical charge knocked it high into the air. The knights whirled around, weapons drawn, to see the crackling, smoking corpse splash into a puddle mere feet from where they stood.

They saluted Oskar, who met them and asked, "Is everyone accounted for? Are the people safe?"

One of the knights answered, "Yes. We believe all of the homes are empty now. We've already slain five of these things outside the outpost. They're coming in over the city walls. The archers are keeping them at bay but with this storm, it's difficult."

"I'm going to recover my friend and Sir Garwin. We'll return to the outpost to aid in its defense shortly," Oskar said.

Oskar hurried on and found Garwin and Alek at the town center

with four beasts circling them. The two warriors stood back to back. Oskar called out, "Alek, take the one behind you but lift your shield toward me. Garwin, take the one in front of you."

Alek nodded. He braced his shield arm. The four animals moved around the two swordsmen as methodically as a pack of cunning wolves. They pounced. Oskar lined up his hands, pointing steadily at Alek's shield. He braced his feet in the mud and fired his magic. Dueling streams of white lightning split the darkness and bounced off Alek's shield, striking two beasts. Alek swirled around after the magical attack and sliced the head from the shoulders of the enemy behind him, while Garwin ducked a streak of claws and pierced the heart of his attacking enemy. Oskar joined them.

Garwin regarded Oskar. "Well done, mage."

A voice from overhead said, "I agree."

Lorelei hovered among the dark clouds, then slowly descended. She landed gently on the muddy ground, her black gown wet and clinging to her hips and legs. She wore a dark purple cloak with a hood, long and wide. Lightning flashed, revealing her pallid face, crimson lips, and icy blue eyes. She approached, rain beating down around her, and eyed the corpses of the beasts.

"You've killed my storm hounds. It was to spare these people the fate of their neighbors in Oremann? Foolish men; my hounds are the people of Oremann!"

Alek shouted over the wind and rain, "This ends now, witch. You will not claim any more lives."

Lorelei raised her arms toward the sky. The clouds over her stirred and thickened. The rhythm of her magical power resonated through Oskar, chiming like mournful funeral bells. A chill ran down his spine. He said, "Stand close to me." Like Lorelei, he lifted his arms. With concentration, he conjured a dome-shaped field of fiery magic, encapsulating himself and the two warriors.

Lorelei sent a blast of red magic into the brewing clouds. A deep rumble of thunder boomed as rain, red as blood, began to fall.

Oskar was relieved to see the torrent of red rain vaporizing against the heat of his magical barrier. He called out, "Do not leave the safety of this ward. Stay within the dome of fire."

Lorelei approached with a cat-like curiosity and examined Oskar's magic. She touched the blazing shroud and recoiled when it singed her fingertips. "You are clever, magician. But my power grows every day. Does yours?"

Oskar studied the woman. In her regal finery she seemed as vulnerable as any woman might be. But the way she walked, the sound of her voice, and her deadly, gaze reminded him of poisonous snakes.

Lorelei focused her blue eyes on Sir Garwin. Garwin shifted the handle of his sword in his hand. The red rain fell over her hood, dripping into her face, staining her white skin, and running off the corners of her lips.

“You said you’d have my head. Now is your chance to make good on your words.” She took a step back, opened her arms in surrender, and taunted him again. “Take me, knight! Send your blade through me and save your kingdom.”

Before Oskar could react, Garwin rushed forward. He drove his sword deep into Lorelei’s chest. She screamed and fell back, clutching the steel protruding from her body. The rain fell on Garwin.

Alek cried out, “Garwin, you fool! Come back!”

Oskar shouted, “Get out of the rain!” The mage watched, horror slicing through his heart. The rain burned through Garwin’s armor like acid. His skin bubbled and peeled back leaving a seared section of his muscle.

Lorelei floated to her feet. She pulled the weapon from her body and threw it to the ground. Garwin screamed as he clawed his way back to Oskar’s protective wall. The rain poured between the links of his armor, burning and dissolving into his skin. He reached for help with a trembling hand, a hand that started to contort and change. Black claws broke from his fingertips; tufts of reddish-brown hair grew rapidly along his knuckles and wrist.

“Alek, help me!” he yelled.

Alek reached out but Oskar held him back. “You mustn’t touch the rain!”

Alek shouted to Garwin, “Move to the barrier.”

Garwin crawled in the mud, using his clawed hands to dig into the wet ground. His voice cracked as he cried out in agony. His groans of pain became guttural growls and as he clawed forward, inching closer to the dome of fire; he spat out blood and teeth. Fangs split his gums, stabbing into his lips.

Oskar could only focus on holding his magic as their comrade struggled to return to them, all the while mutating into what Lorelei had called a storm hound.

Garwin extended his furred hand beyond the fiery wall. Alek took hold, pulling him back into the safety of the circle.

Lorelei approached, standing just a few feet from Oskar’s dome of fire. “I will take this town as I did Oremann. You cannot stop me, mage. Now, I will dispel this petty ward and kill you all.”

Oskar knew his next move was risky, but he had no other choice. He closed his eyes and focused his magic. The dome of fire glowed brighter, hotter. The falling rain boiled and steamed over them. Alek crouched, draping his cloak over himself and the disfigured Garwin.

Oskar outstretched his arms and let out a powerful yell. The fire dome erupted, blasting outward in all directions, burning away Lorelei's dreadful clouds.

The explosion blew the witch into the air, her garments crackled as fire engulfed her. She screamed and vanished in a blast of light and smoke. Fire caught on the bodies of the dead hounds and spread along the rooftops of several homes. To quench the flames, Oskar cast his own elemental spell. He waved at the air in front of him, as if scooping it into a ball and conjured a floating orb of ice. The ball lifted into the sky and burst in a bright silver-blue flash. A deep chill froze the night air and changed the shape of the remaining rain clouds. A clean and mystical snow fell over Silt, blanketing the town in white.

Garwin, now half man, half beast, groaned. Alek lifted the knight and carried him to the outpost.



Through the night, the Knights of Torea did all they could to ease the worries of the townspeople by providing food, clean bedrolls and soft candles. Access to the militia armory was granted to the village men. Many of them took up spears, swords, and bows to comfort their wives and children. Outside the outpost, knights loaded the dead to a horse drawn cart with plans to set them on the pyre in the morning.

Oskar found Commander Fathion tending to his wounded men in the infirmary chamber. "Sir, may I speak to you a moment? It's about Sir Garwin."

"Is he wounded?" Fathion asked. "Bring him here so he can be treated."

"It's worse than that."

Oskar led Commander Fathion to the hall. Alek had laid Garwin on the floor and covered the poor knight with his red cape to hide his horrific bestial features.

The commander crouched down and placed his hand on Garwin's shoulder. "What's happened, brother?"

A raspy growl came from under the cloak. The commander pulled back.

"He has fallen victim to the witch's magic. He is suffering, changing," Oskar said.

With care, Oskar lifted the hood of the cloak to reveal the man-beast. Strands of brown hair hung to his shoulders, getting lost in the knotted mane of red fur. Garwin's face kept a human shape but his cheeks and nose remained more like the snout of a wolf. His teeth had fallen out and in their place hung ivory fangs. Cat-like whiskers stemmed from the corners of his thin black lips. Then the beast

groaned, this time sounding like a man.

“Sir Garwin, can you hear me? Are you awake?” Oskar asked.

Slowly, Garwin opened his eyes. They remained human, unchanged by the witch’s magic. Oskar was relieved to see the glimmer of humanity in the knight.

Oskar asked again, “Can you hear me?”

Garwin’s fox-like ears unfurled, stretching out from the knotted mess of fur, to stand alert at the sides of his head. He winced and lifted his hands to rub his eyes. Two clawed hands caked in mud emerged from under the cloak. The sight of them startled the commander. Garwin tried to speak but only gurgling growls came from him.

“I can’t believe this,” Commander Fathion said. “He’s . . . he’s one of them.” He took several steps away from Garwin.

The sight of the suffering knight saddened Oskar and angered his spirit. Magic power, whatever the form, should never be used in such a way. As he looked once more in Garwin’s eyes, he could hear the wordless plea for help. A question rolled around in his mind. He turned back to the commander. “We must help him. Can’t you see? He is not fully changed.”

The commander pulled his dagger. “What I see is one of the witch’s beasts. He will be locked in the prison until the king decides what to do with him.”

Oskar’s hands balled to fists. “What are you saying? He is a sworn knight of this kingdom. Will you treat him like an animal?”

“I will treat him like the threat that he is.”

“Commander, there might be a way to save him. To reverse the effects of Lorelei’s magic. Afford me a chance to discover how to do this.”

“There is no time. That animal is to be locked up.”

Garwin roared. Oskar stepped back, pulling Alek with him, and watched as Garwin peeled the armor from his shoulders, arms, and legs. Wearing only a silver breastplate bearing the crest of Torea, tattered pants, and Alek’s scarlet cloak, he pushed past Oskar and tackled the commander, knocking him to the floor. He pinned him down with clawed hands and spoke in hoarse, trembling snarls, “I am not an animal!”



My power is not to be wasted!" Darren threw his goblet into the fireplace. The fire roared. Anger boiled inside him.

Lorelei went to him and wrapped her arms around his waist. Her frosty blue eyes stared up at him. "That mage in Silt was stronger. And the strange part was that his magic had the same resonance as yours."

"What mage?"

"The one who fought alongside the warrior. I was unprepared to contend with another caster."

"Warrior and mage? Let me see them." Darren placed a hand over her forehead and closed his eyes. He probed her memory of the attack on Silt. His jaw tensed and he pulled away. "Oskar and Alek. Damn!"

Darren paced the drafty hall. His cloak rippled behind him.

"You know them?" Lorelei asked.

"An understatement."

"How powerful is that mage?"

Darren did not answer. Like a slender black cat, Lorelei coiled on the floor by the fireplace. She caressed the folds of the black gown that flowed out from under her. A gentle hum, like the droning of a tuning fork, began to resonate in the far corner of Darren's mind. His vision blurred, but only for a moment. The humming faded away.

"It is not the mage who troubles you, but the warrior," Lorelei said.

"You're cunning." Darren understood then, the witch had probed his mind using her own magic. He crossed the room and sat beside her. She gave him a tempting, seductive smile. He ran his fingers through her hair, then pulled her head back. She winced and he growled, "Look into my mind again, and you'll see your demise."

Lorelei laughed.

He released her.

"If it would please you, my lord, I will destroy them."

"Yes. It would please me."

"Then I'll need more power."

Darren pushed her onto her back and leaned over her. "Take it from me."

Lorelei pressed her lips against his and knotted her fingers in his curling blond hair. The thrill of her taste and the chill of her touch

excited him. There was a carnal intensity in her that he found intoxicating and empowering. Darren pinned her to the floor, keeping her body firm against his. Lorelei writhed in his embrace and wrestled him over, taking command. He delighted as her lips trailed along his neck and collar. Sparks of searing energy flashed from her body and coursed into him, nearly burning his skin.

Bands of red magic swirled around them while a fiery wind rushed through the room.



## Chapter 6

Three days passed. Alek listened to the sounds coming from an open window. The Knights of Torea burned the corpses, smoke drifting in with the smell of burnt flesh stinging his nose. They also set to work repairing the damaged homes and tavern. Commander Fathion addressed the ever-growing concern of the people by posting additional guards on duty throughout the town. With the extra presence of armed guard, Silt's fears matured to a sense of heightened awareness.



Alek sat in a wooden chair outside Garwin's cell waiting for signs of improvement in the knight's condition. Commander Fathion had carried out his orders despite Alek and Oskar's pleas. It took a team of knights to subdue the man-beast. Alek was forced aside as Garwin raged against them. He lifted men with incredible ease and threw them into furniture. He took arrows in his shoulders but pulled them free as if they were thorns. His claws ripped through shields and reduced swords to shards. The knights rushed him with torches and whips. Countless lashes brought Garwin to his knees.

Alek had to make himself watch. His chest clenched and inhaled a sharp breath with each lash, hoping his friend, his partner in battle, would calm himself enough to not be harmed anymore. The tears had slid down Alek's face before he knew to stop them. The knights clubbed Garwin behind the head and he dropped.

The outpost prison was in the basement. The four barred cells each contained a bedroll and water basin for washing. The guard delivered food to prisoners once a day, and water twice.

Garwin breathed heavily under the hood of the red cloak. He sat crouched against the back wall of his cell. From time to time, he opened his hands to examine the changes. Alek noticed him trembling.

"How are you feeling?"

Garwin answered with a growl, though it was not anger that Alek heard; but sadness.

"Are you in pain, knight?"

Shadows hid the grotesque features of his furred face. "How can

you call me that?"

"Because that's what you are," Alek said.

"Then why are the others treating me this way?"

"They're afraid. You understand that, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Attacking the commander gave them justification to be fearful. Why did you attack him?"

"I'm not entirely certain. I felt such rage. Something took over, the monster I suppose."

"Do you still feel that way?"

"Yes."

"Then perhaps the confines of this cell will help you overcome those feelings."

Garwin stood up and approached Alek. He wrapped his long, clawed fingers around the cell bars. Alek recalled the damage claws like those did to his shield. Garwin's human eyes pleaded with Alek. "I cannot overcome it while in this cage. Release me."

"You know I can't do that."

"You can!" he snarled. Garwin paused at the sound of his inhuman voice and looked down in shame. "I'm sorry, Alek. I need to fight, to battle Lorelei in the form she has given me. In combat, in service to my kingdom, I can better accept what I have become."

"There is no war that can shape a man for the better."

Garwin stepped away from the bars and paced his cell. After several quiet minutes, he asked, "Why do you sit here with me?"

"I care."

"Why? You are not a member of this order."

"You're right. I am not a Knight of Torea. But, like you, I live as one with my sword. You and I fought alongside one another. Bound by honor, bonded in battle—brothers. It is the code of the Calmoren warrior. I sit here because I want to."

"Please, Alek. Release me."

"I will not release you. But I will not stop you from releasing yourself."

Alek gave a wink and called for the guard. A knight responded. "What do you need?"

"There is something wrong with Garwin; I think he is sick."

The knight went to the cell. Garwin snatched him by the collar and pulled his head into the bars, knocking the knight unconscious. Alek removed the cell keys from the guard's belt.

"Bound by honor, bonded in battle—brothers. Dishonor me, and I will end your curse with my steel," Alek said. Though he hoped he'd never have to relieve Garwin of his curse by sword, he meant the words just the same.

Garwin nodded. Alek placed the keys on the floor, inches from the cell, and left the room without looking back.



Later that night, Alek met Oskar in the tavern. Though he did not witness it, Alek knew Garwin had fled his prison. The Calmorens sat at a small table and discussed it over a meal of pork, potatoes, rolls, and corn. Oskar drank a dark blend of tea, while Alek gulped from a carafe of mead.

Oskar spoke softly, "I understand why you did what you did, my boy. Consider, though, that you may have made matters worse for us."

"Garwin suffers. That cage could not help heal the man that still lives inside him. Besides, I don't think it can get much worse than this, old friend. The goal is to get home and stop my brother from gripping Calmoren in his corrupted magic. How much progress have we made in that regard? None."

Alek hued another lump of pork from the slab with his dagger, pierced it and bit it from the tip of the blade. Oskar shook his head. "What do you suggest we do now?"

"I see two options," Alek said with a mouthful of meat. "First, we head east, toward the barren lands. We can keep an eye over the skyline at night for that strange aurora. Perhaps we'll find the witch's trail. Or, we can go to Torea City on our own and rally the royal forces."

"We don't know the way."

Alek shrugged. "We'll get a map."

"Where? From who?"

Alek glanced toward the door as he chewed his meal. Roland strolled in. He met Alek's eyes and headed straight for him.

"Hello again, friends. I thought I'd step away from the outpost for a while. Those knights are an interesting lot, but I'm growing tired of hearing their tales of triumph. You'd think they're a circle of bards!"

"Typical knights. Shining armor doesn't always signify a warrior," Alek scoffed.

"No?" Roland asked.

Alek shook his head and leaned back in his chair. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Don't misunderstand me. Plates of steel and shirts of mail are important, but consider nature's warriors. The mighty lion, he wears no shell or hide of leather to protect him. The bear stands against all foes with courage unmatched. The snake strikes with deadly accuracy, his precision offering the most protection. When I see a knight or fighter in armor, I wonder what kind of warrior is under the metal. Does he wear his raiment because he has to, wants to, or needs to?"

"Your words are nearly poetic," Roland said.

"Don't tell him that." Oskar groaned.

The tavern keep brought food to Roland, who opened his satchel and fished out two gold coins. The man respectfully declined. "Save your gold for Oremann, cleric," the man said. "Gods be with you all."

Roland bowed, his eyes misting.

"Other than the boasting, how are things at the outpost?" Oskar asked.

"Fine, I suppose."

"And Garwin?" pressed Oskar. "Any changes in his condition?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

Garwin's escape had not yet been noticed. They had time to plan.

"By chance, do you have a map in that bag of yours?" Alek asked Roland.

"I always pack one when I travel from Oremann. Why do you ask?"

"We are considering departing Silt without the company of the knights."

"What about Sir Garwin?" Roland asked. "I thought you wanted to remain here to help reverse the witch's magic."

"We've spent enough time in this town. Our journey must commence. We have to keep moving so we can find the way home."

"What about us?" questioned Roland. "Will you press on and leave us to die? You came to Torea knowing our fate. Don't you see? What your world would call fiction, I call prophecy."

"What do you want us to do?" Alek asked.

"At the very least, go to King Foss; tell him who you are. Tell him the Legend of Torea."

"To what end?" challenged Alek. "Will the king lock us away in the dungeons of Castle Torea? Will he call us ill of mind, label us 'doom-sayers' and burn us at the stake? How can we know that he'll believe us?"

"I guess there is no way to know that," Roland said. "Look at what has happened so far. Sir Garwin is proof of the horror that looms on the horizon. I wonder if the king could behold his new face and not believe it."

The three sat in silence and ate their meal. When finished, Alek rose from his chair and leaned on the table with his knuckles. "The sword is the key. The Everblade. I've given it a lot of thought and still I wonder how its legend transcended the realms. How did Calmoren come to know of Torea in the first place? The path between our worlds must have been traveled once before, long ago. The way home rests with the secret of the sword. Somehow, we must find it."

Roland took out his map and unfurled the paper over the table. Alek studied the colorfully inked details; green lands, blue waters and

gray mountains—all cut by marked roads connecting labeled cities.

Roland pointed. “This is Torea City, several day’s ride south on horseback.” He slid his hand to the far right side of the map. “This is the Eastern Barrens. There are no settlements there. Some travelers tell of ancient ruins far out in the barrens. No one knows if these claims are true or the talk of drunken adventurers. We do know that it’s desolate, dry, and windy; a place of sand, stone and silence.”

Oskar asked, “Desolate like a desert?”

“You could call it a desert, though it is not hot. Treacherous cliffs, deep valleys, and jagged boulders make the eastern boarder of Torea dangerous. However, your legend tells of Everheart once existing in the east. Lorelei confirmed that she is from Everheart. So I believe the claims of ruins to be true—it’s all true.”

“Considering the strange lights in the eastern night sky, I’d stake that Lorelei’s power comes from the ruins of Everheart,” Oskar said.

“And that’s where we’ll find the Everblade, somewhere in the Eastern Barrens.” Alek crossed his arms in confidence and looked to Oskar. “We know where we’re going now.”

Roland rolled up his map and handed it to Oskar. “It’s yours. Consider it a gift in gratitude for all you’ve done for Silt and what you will do for Torea. May this map help guide you home.”

Oskar gave Roland a firm handshake. The Calmorens left the tavern and stepped outside. Just then, a stern voice called out, “You there! Remain where you stand!”

A group of five armed knights hurried across the road to the tavern steps. They met Alek and Oskar; the lead knight addressed them. “You are expected at the outpost at once. Commander Fathion has ordered your presence.”

“What does he want with us?” Alek asked, glancing to Oskar.

“The man-beast has escaped,” the knight answered. “You, warrior, are to be detained and questioned.”

“Why me?”

“The prison guard has named you responsible.” The knight turned to Oskar. “And you join in your companion’s guilt by association. Come with us at once or we will take you by force.”

Oskar replied, “We’ll follow willingly. We do not desire conflict. Right, Alek?”

Alek ground his teeth, squeezed his fists as tight as he could, and then slowly let his fingers unfurl. Oskar’s eyes met his as Alek took a deep breath and followed the mage’s indirect command.

“Right.”



Commander Fathion’s anger was palpable. His face reddened when

Alek entered his office. The commander paced the room with his arms behind his back. He stopped and stared at Alek.

"I can have you killed for such betrayal."

"Is that the custom of Torea's royal power?" Alek cracked his knuckles, ready to defend himself.

"No. It is not." He stepped close to Alek. "Tell me why you aided in the beast's escape."

"He is not a beast."

"Answer the question!"

"He did nothing wrong," Alek attested. "I did what was right by the honor between two warriors. Garwin is free now, free to make peace with what has befallen him."

"How very noble of you, stranger. Now a monster is loose out there. He robbed the unconscious guard of his weapons and royal garb. He also took a travel pack from the storeroom. He's got all the tools he needs to live in the wild. Tell me how I'm supposed to find him!"

Oskar tried to intervene, saying, "Commander, can we discuss this calmly?"

"There is no discussion to be had. You violated the order of this outpost and disregarded my authority. This is an offense that cannot be ignored." He motioned for his guardsmen. "I order these men to be locked up immediately. Confiscate the warrior's weapons and get these traitors out of my sight." The commander's eyes met Alek's again. "Draw that sword and I swear it will be the last thing you do."

Alek replied, "My sword chimes for enemies. Though I find you to be an unfit leader, I do not consider you a foe . . . yet."



They spent the night in the same cell that had contained Garwin. Alek examined the deep gashes in the stone wall. "Claw marks. Garwin was honing his new weapons."

The basement prison felt damp and cold. A barred window, too small to pass through, let in the night wind. The window was ground level, just over Oskar's head. The guard table had been moved from the end of the hall to outside their cell. The knight on duty sat at the table reading a book under a lantern's light. From time to time, he glanced up to check on the prisoners. Alek sat on the floor and stared longingly at the locked chest across the room. All of his weapons, as well as Oskar's possessions, remained inside, now property of the Knights of Torea. Oskar looked out the small window.

"The bars are sturdy," Alek said. "The walls and floor are stone. It might be a while before we get out of here."

"We'll stay the night, but that's all," Oskar said. He gave Alek a small smirk and motioned for him to keep his voice down.

Alek moved closer to Oskar so his whisper could be heard. "You have a plan, then?"

"We can't get out of this cell without help."

"You mean to remain here, hoping Garwin comes back for us?"

"No. We have an ally waiting . . . right there." He pointed to the window, where a yellow dandelion looked like a single candle burning in the shadows of the window frame. "In the morning, we'll be free. Rest tonight. You'll need your strength for our hurried departure at dawn."

## Chapter 7



skar eyed the guard, waiting. A flutter of nerves tickled his stomach. The guard's head slouched to one side and his shoulders fell. Sleep took him as the first rays of morning streaked across the sky.

He took in a deep breath as if it would help him be more silent, and moved to the window. He reached for the dandelion; his fingers hovered less than an inch from the soft petals. A ray of yellow light shined from Oskar's fingertip and struck the dandelion. The blossom leaned, as if wanting to meet his touch. It squirmed, appearing trapped in the soil, struggling to get free.

"Come on, little one," whispered Oskar. "You can make it. Reach for me and grow like a grand oak tree." The yellow weed pulled hard, nearly uprooting itself; until at last, its round face fell against Oskar's index finger.

The golden light burned from Oskar's fingertips and the dandelion's face, illuminating the cell. He focused his magical touch, sending more crackling energy into the weed. Green, leafy stems emerged from the sides of the dandelion, and wrapped around the mage's hand like tiny arms. Alek moved to the opposite side of the cell when the dandelion enlarged.

Within half a minute, the dandelion was the size of a vase that might hold a thousand buds. In another half minute, it was too large for Oskar to hold up with one hand. The mage stood under the window propping up the weed as he filled it with energy. Long green roots broke from the ground around the window's edge and crawled into the cell. The roots coursed the length of the floor, twisting and slithering like fat snakes. They wrapped around the bars and stretched beyond the cell.

Oskar whispered to the large face of the dandelion, which listened like an obedient dog. "The guard must be restrained. Do so silently."

Oskar watched the roots crawl up the guard's chair and wrap around his waist and torso. The guard woke, and tried to yell out for help. A thick leafy paw clamped over his mouth, muffling his shouts.

Oskar whispered another command. "We need the keys. Find them."

The dandelion sent a wiry root clasping around the guard's key



ring. The root recoiled and dropped the keys in Alek's waiting hand. Alek unlocked the cell and hurried for the chest containing their confiscated possessions. The restrained guard tried to break free of the knot of roots but to no avail. Alek worked quickly to recover his dagger, sword, shield, and Oskar's satchel.

The dandelion grew too big for Oskar to lift. His arms and legs quivered and beads of sweat rolled down his face. He dropped the dandelion with a thud. The hulking blossom lay sprawled on the floor like a sleeping bear. Oskar knelt beside it to gather his strength. He wiped the sweat from his head and thanked the giant weed.

"Oskar, we got the cell open but we can't exit through the outpost. We need another way out," Alek said.

Oskar nodded and buried his glowing hands in the dandelion's shaggy mane of yellow petals. "Cover me with your shield facing the windowed wall," he said.

Alek obeyed and crouched near Oskar. He poised his shield before them. Oskar increased the flow of magic. The roots swelled, shattering the wall. Bits of rock and dirt blew across the prison, pinging off Alek's shield. Oskar squinted and bent away from the blast. A network of roots spilled into the cell as shards of stone fell around them. The ruined wall became a passage to freedom.

Oskar fanned the dust from his eyes and brushed off the bits of dirt from his robe. He and Alek scurried up the mass of roots and out into the morning.



"There," Alek said, pointing to the stable. "Follow me."

Clinging to the remaining shadows, they hurried out of town and ran. A roof of wood planks covered the stalls. Ten large horses chewed from pails of straw and oats. Alek spotted a stable keep scooping oats from a canvas sack. He moved behind the man and wrapped his thick arm around his neck. He squeezed until he fell unconscious.

"Take a horse," Alek instructed Oskar. "I'll fix two to that carriage and we'll ride out of here."

"Three horses?" Oskar questioned.

"Trust me."

Within minutes, Alek secured two horses to a carriage and climbed into the seat. He cracked the reins. The horses thundered off, the wooden wheels bouncing and creaking over the stony ground. Oskar followed close behind.

As Alek commanded his horse, he checked the sky, being sure to keep the rising sun directly ahead. They pushed their horses as fast as the creatures would allow, traversing the road running parallel with the Laughing River. Alek panned the woodland and river bank, hoping

he might see Garwin or the signs of a camp. He glanced over his shoulder. Oskar rode steadily behind him. *I owe my safety to him and I will guard him as truly as he guards me.* Oskar's eyes met his and the old man sent him a smile.

The morning passed, as did the afternoon. They stopped only once to rest the horses and drink from the river. By early evening, their eastward journey found a moment of choice. Alek slowed the carriage to a halt at a crossroad. A wooden post bearing three directional signs stood in the corner of the crossing. One sign pointed east and read: CROWNWATER; another pointed south and read: TOREA CITY; the last pointed behind them, west, and read: SILT, OREMANN.

Oskar opened his satchel and produced the map. "Let me see," he muttered. "We're just outside of Silt and judging by the length of the east road depicted here, the next settlement, Crownwater, might be several days away; considering our current rate of travel, of course. It may be wiser, and faster, to take the south road to Torea City. What say you, Alek?"

Alek studied the map. "East. We must continue east, to the Barrens. But first, we need to do something about the knights from Silt likely on our trail." Alek unfastened one of the horses from the carriage and adjusted the leads for a single rider. He handed the horse's reins to Oskar. "Take her for a moment."

Alek positioned the carriage along the south road. He cracked the carriage's reins, sending the horse trotting down the south road away from them. "The knights will follow the carriage tracks south, away from us. Let's continue riding east for a while, off the road, in the grasses. We'll set camp when the night is high over us."

They rode on through the evening and stopped to make camp under the sprawling branches of a tall tree. It grew from the top of a grassy hill rising above the road and riverbank.

Oskar set a small fire under the light of the moon. In the stillness of the night, they heard the rustle of a bird in the branches above. The bird took flight from the tree, swooping low over their fire. The crimson sheen of the raven's wings flashed in the glow of the flames. The red raven beat its wings and flew down the hill's slope, lifting upward at the base and soaring into the black sky.

Alek sprang to his feet, fists clenched. "That foul witch has winged eyes. She's watching us." He was growing tired of trickery. "How are we to prevail against the scrying eye of an ancient evil?"

Oskar moved away from the shadows of the tree. "It seems we interest her."

"I wish we could see what she's doing right now."

Oskar opened his book of spells. "I've got just the thing." He flipped through the pages, combing the lines of text with a searching finger.

“Ah yes. This spell will do nicely. Sit by the fire, on the other side from me, and be still.” Alek followed Oskar’s lead and sat at the edge of the campfire. “Now stare into the flame. Look deeply into its white core and let it burn away your thoughts.”

The mage opened one of the pouches on his belt and took a pinch of a grainy salt. He flicked the salt into the fire, sending the lashing tufts of flame high into the air. The campfire crackled as the strange salts burned. “I’ve cleansed the fire. Its searing body will become a window.” He waved his hands in a circle then spoke softly to the fire. “Show us the one who troubles this land.”

A vision emerged in the belly of the flames, as clear as the moon’s reflection in the river. The image of Lorelei came into view. The witch paced a decaying stone room lit by torches. Broken stone blocks lay strewn about. The torchlight played on her pale face, making her more ghostly than Alek remembered.

The fire’s eye kept the focus on Lorelei as she walked across the room. She met another person, clad in dark blue robes; the face of this individual remained under a long hood, hidden from view. Alek determined the other to be a man; the shoulders too wide to be female. Lorelei and the man stood close, backs to the view of the flame; but Alek and Oskar noticed the witch place a pouch into his hand. The man opened the pouch and poured several jewels and gold coins into his palm. The riches glittered under the torchlight.

The man tucked the pouch into his robes and stepped away from Lorelei. He outstretched his arms and opened his pale hands, conjuring magical energy of blue and red. Rays of colored light streamed from his hands and swirled around him. He focused his magic, projecting the blue and red light onto the center of the stone floor. A brilliant blast ensued from the fusion of the forces, and a portal took form, gaseous and red.

Oskar gasped. “It . . . it can’t be.”

Alek leaned closer, staring intently at the scene in the flames. “Darren,” he said through gritted teeth.

The portal’s fiery vapors swirled. Lorelei took a knee, as if worshipping Darren and his magical passage. Bits of rock tumbled into the inhaling conduit. Darren stepped inside, vanishing into the depths of the hungry red mouth, the portal closing around him. Alek watched in silence as he struggled to comprehend how his brother could align himself with such a foe.

Alone in the crumbling stone room, Lorelei remained still. Slowly, her head turned; then all at once, she spun to face them. She pointed at them, opened her mouth, and screamed. The campfire erupted. The force of the blast knocked them backward. All went dark as the witch’s scream roared around them, echoing over the sound of the

river.

## Chapter 8

The horses neighed as the sun lifted over their camp. The night brought no rest or comfort to Alek. Weary and tired, Alek washed in the river. The cool water refreshed his spirit. He noticed Oskar packing his meager belongings back into his satchel and wondered how long his old friend had sat up reading his spell book. Oskar mounted his horse, Alek followed suit and they headed further east.

The forest pulled away as the landscape changed to fertile hills and vast emerald fields. The Laughing River cut its way through rolling highlands. All around Alek, the lush green heartlands spread as far as his eyes could see. Patches of mist weaved over the land like cloudy, white brooks soundlessly flowing between the knolls. Torea's beauty rivaled that of their homeland. Alek inhaled the crisp air and thought of Calmoren and of Darren's treachery.

"Darren will pay for his crimes and for his allegiance with that witch."

"It seemed Lorelei revered him," Oskar said, "like one might a deity."

"Perhaps he has some spell on her."

"I believe his stature over her comes from something far more powerful than any magic."

"And what could be more powerful?"

"Deceit. She bowed for him when he opened the Gateway of Realms. That leads me to believe she thinks him a god."

Alek nodded his understanding. "Now I am further motivated. Finding Lorelei means finding my brother." He cracked the reins, urging his horse to a gallop.

*I'm coming for you, Darren; and no amount of magic in this world or any other, will stop me.*



They traveled for two and a half days, keeping to the river and camping in the hills far from the road. As the afternoon eclipsed the morning, they passed travelers. The folk seemed pleasant enough to Alek, exchanging friendly nods and half smiles as they passed.

Squared and fenced farmlands appeared on the right side of the

road. Rows of soil striped the sides of the green hills, and wagons, filled with various crops, rested on the edges of the farms. The farmers greeted Alek and Oskar as they passed.

The road ascended a tall hill, and from the top, the city of Crownwater and the bright blue body of Brother's Lake came into view. Alek shielded his eyes from the sunlight shining off the water.

The town hugged the northern shore of the lake, its buildings tall with pointed roofs and looming spires. From their vantage point, Crownwater looked like it could be a capital city. The shine of gold plated gables atop smooth buildings of white stone rivaled the brilliance of the lake.

They pressed on, riding down the hillside and crossing a wide bridge built of iron and wood. The road continued along the river, leading them closer to Crownwater. Alek reared his horse to a halt.

Oskar did the same and asked, "Why have we stopped? The town is just ahead."

"I know you're tired, friend," replied Alek. "I, too, could use a hot meal and a warm bed. But I think it wise to inquire about the town before we ride in. Specifically, if there are knights stationed here or not. We're fugitives, after all. Let's ride back to one of the farms and see if anyone is willing to talk with us."

"We don't need to. There," Oskar said, pointing to a woman kneeling along the riverbank. She wore a weathered gray shawl over her head and worked at washing a basket of clothes in the river.

They dismounted and approached her. "Good day to you," greeted Oskar.

The woman smiled, her teeth rotten and yellowed. Her face wore smudges of mud from her day's work. "Greetings, travelers. What can I do for you?" She continued wringing her clothes in the rushing water.

"Is the Royal Militia stationed here?" Oskar asked.

"No," the woman answered, "though we have heard word that Silt is sending knights; they're searching for escaped prisoners, from what I hear, and should arrive by way of the river anytime now."

Oskar nodded. "Thank you for that information."

Alek added, "Crownwater is grand. Torea Kingdom must be proud of such a place."

"The town is grand indeed. If you like finery and pompous flair, you've come to the right place. Some call Crownwater the second capital of the kingdom. I call it the first to fall should war come to Torea."

Alek asked, "Why do speak of your city in such a manner?"

The woman stared at Alek and looked him up and down. She laughed softly and replied, "Crownwater is like you, traveler. You are

a warrior, but you must admit that even a sword is never more powerful than a crown. Such is the way here, in this city by the lake.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Crownwater serves the kingdom by presiding over Brother’s Lake and fortifying the great dam. The city could rule, but it lacks the power to make it so.”

Alek challenged, “What are you saying, woman?”

“The answer lies in the dam. Imagine using the lake as a weapon against the king himself.” She wrung her clothes; water trickled from the wet garment. Alek noticed the dripping water changing to blood. He looked closer at the woman’s clothing. Her soiled white dress, brown shoes, and gray shawl seemed fitting for a working woman. But there was something else, something out of place. She turned to put the wet garment in her basket and Alek saw red feathers, tied with string and beads, dangling from her belt.

“Come, my boy,” Oskar said. “I think we should be on our way.”

The two headed for their horses but the woman called out, “Mind your step!” She followed up the bank, pointing to the ground in front of them. “A deadly snake lays in waiting. He means to bite your ankles for your thoughtless haste.”

Alek took a step back when a long, black snake lifted its head and hissed. Its silver eyes targeted them with unwavering precision. Alek pulled his dagger.

The woman crouched near the snake. “There is no need to worry. Like you both, this snake is lost. He belongs in the water and just needs someone to show him the way home.” She reached down and snatched the snake by the neck. “Come with me, I’ll help you.”

The venomous creature writhed in her hand, wrapping its body around her arm. She carried it to the river, and then lowered it to the water, her hands glowing with red magic. The snake doubled in size as it splashed into the current. It lashed in the water as it swam downstream toward the mouth of Brother’s Lake, growing rapidly with every passing second.

Alek and Oskar ran to their horses. By the time they mounted, the snake resembled a fallen tree. Oskar said, “Crownwater must be warned of Lorelei’s monster. I fear how big the snake may become.”

“There is no time to warn the town. If it breaks the dam, it will let loose a torrent that will flood the two rivers and render Torea City under water. We must slay it.” Alek pulled the horse’s reins, and they galloped back over the bridge and cut left, following the marked road to the dam. From behind, Lorelei cackled, “More powerful than a dandelion, mage!”

Alek growled, “Curse that witch!”

Alek found Crownwater Dam truly impressive. Enormous stone blocks linked together to create a wall higher than any chapel spire or castle tower he'd ever seen. To his left, the wide lake stretched, sparkling in the sunlight. To his right, on the other side of the dam, the Heartland River formed from the controlled release; this river cut its way to the southwest, winding through the Torea highlands.

The south road continued over the top of the dam, wide enough for a horse-drawn carriage to pass. Leaving their horses at the base of the road, Alek and Oskar hurried over the dam, stopping at the center to look out over the vast lake.

Alek panned the distant water. "I don't see Lorelei's monster. But there's a large boat out there, do you see it?"

Oskar squinted to cut through the lake's brilliant shine. "Yes, I see it."

"They're in danger," Alek said. "I wish we had some way of . . ."

Alek lost his words when the snake, now a colossal black serpent, emerged from the depths of the lake. The serpent's head resembled the snake it once was, but long, fish-like fins framed its face and sharp spines like dreadful thorns, lined its jaw. Its long, scaled neck loomed over the boat for only a moment before crashing down over the middle of the deck.

The boat shattered like brittle drift-wood; the people aboard screamed as they flew into the air, falling into the cold lake. From the top of the dam, the horror of it remained far away; the boat seemed but a toy, and the people appeared the size of ants. They swam for their lives, some holding tightly to debris, reaching desperately for their loved ones. Alek could only watch as the terrible serpent slipped in and out of the water, taking people into its mouth.

Within a few short minutes, the lake went quiet. The rippling water splashed small waves against the dam. The sunlight glimmered from the lake peacefully, offering no indication that a deadly monster lurked beneath it. Alek held his focus, his eyes sharpened as if ready to hunt. A half-grin formed on his face. This was real, not an illusion, not a spell. *And I will kill it.*

Alarm bells rang from the lakeside docks. Yells of panic from the town echoed over the water. From the height of the dam, Alek watched Crownwater's guard scurrying about the waterfront, assessing the situation and calling for deckhands, fishermen, and boaters to evacuate. He recognized the knights from Silt assisting the guards, their polished armor gleaming in the sun. Alek returned his attention to the lake. The calm water, though blue and beautiful, was a lie.

"It's been under the water for too long, Oskar. Where is it?"



"I don't know. My question is how are we going to kill it?"

"I know only one way." Alek drew his Oremann-forged sword.

The dam rumbled under his feet. The quake was so great, Alek struggled to keep his footing. On the right side of the dam, he heard a loud crack, followed by a rushing hiss. He peered over the side; a large fracture, shaped like a streaking bolt of lightning, stretched the length of the dam. Water sprayed from the wounded stone.

Alek leaned over the left edge, staring into the dark lake, searching for the serpent. Another rumble occurred. They held tightly to the walls. The crack opened more, increasing the violence of the geyser blasting from the wall. Alek searched the water, and this time, he glimpsed the shiny body of the creature, just a few feet below the surface. He dropped his shield, climbed onto the wall, and leapt over the side with sword in hand.

Alex aimed the tip of his blade as he fell toward the water. He landed hard atop the serpent's scaled body, plunging his sword into its back. The feel of the steel blade breaking through the leathery plates of its body thrilled him. The water beast lashed its tail and swam upward, breaking from the surface and writhing to rid itself of the swordsman clinging to its back.

"Have you lost your mind?" Oskar cried out.

"The dam," shouted Alek as he struggled to keep his grip. "Fix it!"

Out of the corner of his eye, Alek watched Oskar lift his body high into the sky and float over the center of the dam. His white robes rippled, beating against his legs like wind-filled sails. The dam shuddered, still weakening from the serpent's previous assault. Oskar aimed a steady hand at the breaking wall and cast a ray of bright blue energy at the heart of the fracture. The spraying water hardened to an arch of dazzling ice. Oskar kept a constant blast of arctic magic pouring. If he let up, Alek feared the water pressure might break through his growing wall of ice.

The serpent hissed as it lashed from side to side. Alek slipped. With scales like greased leather, the body proved too slick. He kept hold of his sword and fell to the lake. The serpent recoiled, sliding back under the water. With no shore nearby, Alek treaded water and called to Oskar, "It's gone. Help me!"

Oskar nodded and with his left hand, he projected another beam of cold magic to the water around Alek. The surface froze fast, becoming a plane of ice. Alek pulled himself out and crawled onto the portion of frozen lake. Oskar drifted high in the air, one hand streaming freezing energy down on the lake, the other on the cracking dam. Alek had never seen Oskar unleash such focused and powerful magic, but he could tell the outpouring drained the mage. Oskar let out painful groans, as might a man trying to lift a boulder over his head.

Alek readied his sword in both hands and waited for the serpent to reveal itself. He could feel the residual chill of Oskar's magic in the air around him. Frost formed on the edge of his blade as tufts of breath puffed from his nose. The ice under his boots trembled and a great splash erupted; the serpent emerged, leaping out of the water and onto the plane. Cracks streaked under its weight as it slithered in a frenzy toward the swordsman.

With knees bent, sword poised and eyes on his enemy, Alek waited for the attack. The serpent coiled and raised its trunk over Alek. It opened its mouth to reveal four long fangs, hanging low and dripping with venom. Alek shouted, "Come at me!"

The serpent sprang forward, its attack nearly a blur. Alek rolled, evading its deadly maw by inches. The creature's face slammed hard against the ice; the impact of the attack broke the surface, reducing the frozen platform to a chain of unstable icebergs. Alek and the monster fell back into the lake. He swam to an iceberg just large enough to stand on. The cold chunk rocked and tilted under him as he struggled to climb onto its face.

Alek's left hand clung to the berg, digging into the sharp edges of ice while his right clutched his sword.

*I've lost sight of it. It's under there somewhere; I've got to get out of the water.*

Straight ahead, Alek saw the rising humps of the creature's spine. A part of him felt relieved that it did not take him from below, biting into his legs and dragging him under. This serpent meant to strike him head on; like the snake it once was, it preferred a calculated, precise attack. Closer and closer, its body coursed through the lake, shattering the remaining plates of ice. In a burst of water, the serpent emerged, its silver eyes locking onto Alek. It opened its mouth and hissed. Alek kicked and pulled, trying as hard as he could to pull his body onto the iceberg. Again and again, he slipped off the ice, falling back into the water. He was helpless, an easy victim.

The serpent moved in for the kill, but when low and feral roar echoed over the lake it stopped and turned toward the sound. Alek looked beyond to see a brown-furred beast, wearing a silver breastplate and blue cloak, bounding across the icebergs as agile as a tiger—Sir Garwin.

Garwin roared again, gripping the ice with long black claws, leaping from one berg to the next with ease. The colossal snake let out a gurgling roar but Garwin pressed on, leaping high into the air, snatching hold of its neck. He dug his claws into its scales and climbed up the side of its face as it writhed and shook, trying to toss him away. The man-beast's claws slashed wildly. Blood poured from the serpent's brow, streaming into its eyes. It screeched and hissed in pain.

With the enemy occupied, Alek jabbed his sword into the ice and used it as leverage to lift his body out of the water. He pulled his blade free and stood, balancing and ready. Garwin wrangled the foe but Alek knew Garwin could not hold on much longer. He pulled his dagger and hurled it, the sharp blade finding its mark in the left eye. The snake wailed, spraying venom from its fangs and lashing its tail in agony. The water swelled to great waves. Alek struggled to keep his balance on the iceberg. Garwin jabbed his claws deeper and climbed higher onto the head, perching on the very top.

The serpent focused its rage on Alek, who readied his blade with both hands, aiming the deadly tip. He looked briefly to Garwin, their eyes met and in that moment, the two warriors understood what to do. With jarring speed, the horrible snake dove, mouth open, for Alek. He braced his blade, preparing to meet the attack. As the mouth fell over Alek, Garwin hammered down on the face. The powerful strike stunned it, knocking its attack off target. Alek let out a battle cry and plunged his sword up into the top of the monster's mouth, the blade sinking deep into its brain. In a flash of water, the three fell into the lake.

Trapped in the mouth of the serpent, Alek held his breath and fought to free his sword. The lake water darkened as the dead creature sank. Its leathery body coiled and folded as its weight pulled it down. Alek gave the trusted Oremann blade a final pull, expending the air in his lungs. Finally, the weapon came loose. With a sure stroke of his blade, he cut open the side of the face and hurried out of the mouth. The lake bottom erupted into thick clouds of mud as the monster met the stony floor.

Alek kicked and pulled his way upward, all the while fighting the intense burn in his chest. At last, the surface broke. He gasped, his lungs sucking in as much air as possible. Treading water, he signaled to Oskar that he was all right.

A series of splashes erupted near Alek. Garwin's head emerged as he coughed violently. He kicked and flailed in the water, then slipped under. Alek realized the man-beast could not swim with claws, armor, and a heavy, wet cloak.

He hurried to Garwin, took hold of his matted mane, and swam toward the shore. The knights from Silt waited at the water's edge. As Alek pulled Garwin from the lake, he decided he would surrender. He had no desire to fight anymore.

A group of knights waded into the water and wrapped dry blankets around the two. Commander Fathion stepped from the group and approached Alek. Alek kept Garwin's arm slung over his shoulders. Though exhausted, he held him upright. Garwin's fur dripped with water and blood. He coughed, trying to regain his breath.

Fathion said, "You've done a great deed today. On behalf of Torea, thank you."

"I did not do it alone," Alek replied.

Garwin shied away. The commander faced him and held out his hand. "Come, Sir Garwin. Let's get you warm and dry."

Garwin opened his clawed hand and reached for the commander. Commander Fathion pulled him in for an embrace. "Forgive my thoughtlessness. You're a better man than I."



The following day brought labor and mourning to Crownwater. The town masons and engineers set to work on repairing the dam as Oskar's residual magic held the ice in place. With the dead accounted for, services were held and the chapel bells tolled every hour in their honor. As night eclipsed, candles took light in the homes and businesses, banishing the shadows. Alek recalled that the people of Calmoren did the same for their dead. He knew why. On the first night after death the path to the spirit realm could be lit by the lights of the living.

In the morning, the city celebrated Alek, Oskar, and Sir Garwin for their heroic triumph. The town's tavern became a hall of festivities where complimentary food and pleasantries, fit for the king himself, were provided at no cost.

The Crownwater tailors presented the group with new garments. Alek received clean leather boots, a tunic sewn from soft hide and a dark, red cloak of wool. The blacksmiths offered a gleaming long sword secured in a black scabbard. The hilt shined as bright as the blade, a polished silver bearing wavy etchings representing the water of Brother's Lake. The handle, long enough to grip with two hands, adhered to Alek's grasp with a tightly woven leather wrapping.

Oskar graciously accepted a black dyed robe trimmed in silver silk, elegant enough for a royal advisor. The town's leatherworker knelt before the mage and presented a sturdy new satchel large enough for several books and scrolls. Neatly packed within it, rested bundles of fresh herbs, exotic teas, and arcane powders.

The knights gifted Sir Garwin with a skirted cuirass of leather and steel. The body armor closed around his torso with strips of studded leather skirting his waistline, falling to the height of his knees. His blue knight's cloak was washed of serpent blood and fastened to the shoulders of the cuirass with gold clasps shaped like the blazing sun on the Torea crest.

Bards sang while playing instruments and folks joined in dance and merriment, all for the victory over the serpent. Alek felt honored and proud of the battle they had won, though he wanted to continue the

journey to find the Everblade and the way home.

Time passed, and for him, every minute mattered. Alek thanked the townsfolk and stepped out of the tavern. He stood on the tavern porch with a mug of spiced ale. As his thoughts settled, a horse drawn carriage rolled to a stop in front of the tavern, its sides adorned with the silken banners of the royal crest.

A man clad in an elegant blue doublet, white leggings and gold trimmed mantle emerged from the carriage and approached Alek. He gave a courteous bow.

“Greetings to you, good sir. Your presence, and that of your party, is requested by His Majesty, King Yolfere Foss. The orders.” He handed Alek a tightly rolled scroll tied in blue ribbon. “Please prepare for departure to the capital city in the morning.”

Alek tucked the scroll under his arm and took a gulp of his ale. *To Torea City then.*

## Chapter 9

The party journeyed southwest for several days and nights, traversing the roads that followed the Heartland River. They passed many small settlements along the way, villages not marked on Roland's map. The residents greeted the caravan of knights warmly, sometimes offering baskets of bread and vegetables. Commander Fathion accepted the gifts but only after paying the good people fairly.

Alek enjoyed the travel, finally accepting the knights' plans. Indeed, it was wiser to consult with the king and devise a battle plan than to hike blindly into the Eastern Barrens. Still, the latter seemed to always be Alek's way. He preferred striking swiftly and surely; though this enemy, he knew, was something too big to face alone.

As the carriage wheeled over the road, he sat calm, with his new blade at rest in his lap. The landscape of Torea Kingdom passed him by. Deep breadths of green forest, russet roadways, reaching gray mountains—the beauty of the land could not be contained. Soft plumes of white mist billowed around the riverbanks and at the base of short waterfalls. Perpetual fog rolled through the distant highlands while silent clouds, large enough to hold cities of their own, rode the winds of the azure sky. Alek sighed. Though a grand landscape, it was not Calmoren.

On the final evening of the journey, the knights made a circular camp on a hilltop near the road. In the distant south, Torea City and her majestic castle waited, perched high on the rocky ledges of the coast. Six towers, with conical spires, reached far into the sky, shining in the rising moonlight and parting the canopy of stars. Atop of each, waved long banners of gold. The castle keep presided over the royal waterfront and the hundreds of homes secured within the city walls. Its body, lit by mounted torches, wide fire bowls and hanging lanterns, resembled a glorious cathedral. Crenelated curtain walls, built of smoothed stone, overshadowed the network of city buildings secured within its frame. Rounded bastions fortified the corners of these battlements, standing guard over the roads and surrounding land.

Beyond the expanse of Torea City, the Silver Sea shined. The final hues of daylight painted the ocean's western edge pink and orange

while the night's first stars took light in the deepening shroud of black. The chiming of harbor bells echoed over the land, blending with the murmur of the shore. Alek stood away from the camp, gazing out at the spectacular sight of Castle Torea set against the sea.

"There she is," Fathion said proudly, "the royal capital of this great kingdom. Beautiful."

"Indeed. I've never seen a castle so lovely. As a child, I enjoyed the stories of Torea. Never once did I think it could be real. Now, it stands only a day's hike away and all I can think about is how homesick I've become."

"I want to hear about the place you call Calmoren and of the legend your people tell. Cleric Roland believes that you and Oskar are the key to saving our land. Even Garwin, my finest knight, stands ready to follow you. I am ready to listen."

By the light of the campfire, Alek and Oskar shared their story with Fathion and his troop. The Legend of Torea was recited and explained. Oskar used his magic to conjure scenes of past events in the body of the fire. Images of all they had endured appeared in the heart of the flames.

The old mage stirred memories into the campfire. He showed them Calmoren; green hills not unlike those of the Torea highlands, deep valleys and long farmlands. The historic Hall of Fathers sat proudly at the foot of the Calmoren plains, the fertile heartland of their kingdom. Then, a mighty fortress took form; one with two towers and a domed keep—Honor Hold, the seat of the royal family. Alek's eyes moistened as the images of home came to life.

The visions faded as Oskar grew tired. The fire crackled, settling to its normal state. The old mage rubbed his eyes. He said to Commander Fathion. "That is our truth."



The group started for the city at sunrise, keeping to the main road. The sun played on the Silver Sea making the surface of the water sheen like polished steel.

As the daylight spread over the coastline, Torea's weatherworn walls illuminated a brilliant white, as would a monument of timeless marble. The edges of the stone battlements reflected the golden hues of the morning sun. Alek thought the castle's six towers just as grand, each appearing made of glass and gold.

Just under the rocky overlook supporting the city, opened a wide harbor. Rows of docks and sturdy wooden buildings comprised what could be mistaken for a small town. Tall ships fitted with elegant sails rested in the harbor. Sailors, deckhands, innkeepers, cargo companies, fishermen, guards, and commoners cluttered the waterfront. The

creaking of hulls, the rustle of hanging sails and the caw of gray-winged gulls sounded on the wind.

The air cooled as they traversed the coastal road and by early afternoon, the towering walls of Torea loomed over them. Alek guessed the mighty walls could hold back the very ocean.

Fathion led his men to the barbican, a square building serving as the preliminary entrance to the city. The barbican had weathered stonewalls and heavily guarded towers adorned with long blue banners depicting the kingdom crest. Knights wielding bows paced the length of the parapet, and looked over the edge of the barbican walls, watching intently as the group reared their horses and carriage to a halt.

A knight clad in mail met Commander Fathion. Garwin pulled his hood down to hide his face.

“Greetings, Commander.” The guard straightened his posture. His eyes turned to Alek and Oskar. His brow dipped in suspicion. “Who are they?”

Fathion replied, “Be at ease. They are allies from another kingdom. Torea owes them a great deal of appreciation for their deeds thus far.”

“Ah, the swordsman and the mage.” The guard nodded. “I’ve already heard the bards singing of your heroics. Word travels fast here. Alek and Oskar, am I right?”

Alek replied, “Honor to you, knight.”

The guard circled their troupe searching for anything out of the ordinary; a standard measure of security. He signaled for the men atop the parapet to open the barbican gates, then led them through the stone building.

Alek tensed as he traversed the barbican. *This is a deadly checkpoint*, he thought. *We’re vulnerable, helpless against the will of the royal guard.* His hand instinctively rested on his sword.

The short road through the structure possessed many points where invading enemies could be killed. Archers roosted behind narrow windows, ready to let loose armor piercing arrows. Murder holes opened overhead, conduits through which molten tar, boiling water or heavy stones could be dropped. At the end of the passage, a metal portcullis waited to come crashing down, impaling the invaders and sealing off access to the city gates.

Once cleared through the barbican, the party approached the city’s silver gates. Tall double doors of bright steel bent and twisted to create the image of everlasting vines and leaves. The metal vines knotted toward the center and gripped a large Torea crest. When the guards opened the gates, the crest parted down the center.

Commander Fathion addressed the group. “To the castle at once. Follow me.”



It was obvious to Alek that their presence excited the citizens. As they rode horses through the roads leading to the castle, the folk stared, pointed, and whispered to one another; others shied away in fear. A group of young boys wielding wooden swords trailed behind the knightly caravan imagining to be part of the group. Alek smiled as he recalled doing the same with his brother long ago.



It was late in the summer and he and Darren chased one another across the south fields of their family farm. With wooden swords in hand, the boys battled beyond the pastures and down to the old stone bridge that joined the banks of Overstone Brook. The summer's sun had dried out the waterway, leaving only a sharp bed of stones. Young Alek ran onto the bridge and beckoned Darren to follow. Darren hurried after his brother and met him in the middle.

"Come at me," Alek taunted. "This is the boundary to my kingdom and no one will cross without besting me in a duel."

Darren readied his sword and bowed to accept the challenge. Alek attacked with an overhead strike. Darren brought his sword up to guard only to have his blade crack from Alek's blow. He twirled away, swinging laterally at Alek's torso. Alek hooked his sword down and stopped Darren's attack. He laughed. "You see little brother, my weapon is true. You cannot win."

Darren pulled back and made a diagonal cut. Alek met the stroke with a matching swing, snapping Darren's sword and sending the halves of splintered wood falling to the stony riverbed. Alek went to the edge and peered over the side. The rocks, nearly thirty feet below, looked like the tops of gray skulls. He glanced back and saw Darren leaning over the opposing edge, grumbling over his broken weapon. *Now for my finishing strike*, thought Alek. He let out a battle cry and charged. Darren turned to see his brother rushing him. Alek lunged and Darren side-stepped, but his brother did not pull back. Alek stumbled then, losing his footing from the momentum of his charge. His boot slid and he tumbled over the edge of the bridge, catching himself with one hand. He called out for Darren with panic in his eyes. Darren dropped down and clamped onto Alek's wrist.

"Don't let me fall, brother!" Alek pleaded. He would never forget the fear in Darren's eyes as he clung to him. It was as if his life hung over the bridge. Darren struggled to pull him up but was not strong enough. His grip broke as surely as his sword had.

Alek fell then, all the while reaching upward for his brother. Then he saw Darren's eyes flash with a strange red light. His palms glowed like tiny orange lanterns. A warm energy wrapped around Alek. His fall halted; the soles of his boots hovered inches from the rocks.

Darren held him in a quiet net of magic.



Alek pushed the memories out of his mind and took in the sights around him.

Blue and silver banners swayed in the salty breeze. Peddlers and shopkeepers decorated their carts and doorways with laurels and painted shells. Women hung flowers over their windows and bards played cheerful music on pipes, lutes, and lap drums.

Oskar said to Fathion, "I'd guess the people are fancying for a celebration of some kind."

"I wish it were so," Fathion replied. "News of the witch has generated grave concerns. The custom is to display colors of merriment and good cheer to ward against feelings of fear and despair. They do this also for the memory of the dead."

"I understand," Oskar replied. "Fill the heart with light during times of darkness."

"This custom was not always the way of the Torea people."

"Oh?"

"Twenty-six years ago, Queen Loretta Foss died shortly after giving birth to her daughter."

"Torea has a princess then?"

"Indeed," confirmed Fathion. "Princes Joanell. You see, the people had decorated the city in this manner in anticipation of the baby's birth; a great celebration was planned. But when Queen Loretta died, King Foss was torn between the joy of his daughter's birth and the grief of his wife's passing. The following day, the king looked out the tower window with Joanell in his arms and saw the town dressed in color. Though the people had lost a great queen, they sang happy songs. The celebration went on to honor the queen and the princess. So it started that during times of discontent, the royal city wears its warmest colors."



Their footfalls echoed in the castle's great hall. Torches, lanterns, and rows of tabletop candelabra filled the castle's main foyer with a clean, soothing light. Colorful streamers clung to the columns and rails. Bundles of flowers and clusters of painted rocks and shells dressed the tables. A calming quiet lingered in the domed room as castle keepers swept, dusted, and shined the brass and silver décor. The workers paid the group of weathered travelers little mind. The chinking of knights' armor seemed to be the loudest sound throughout the entire hall.

The arching ceiling reminded Alek of the great dome of Honor

Hold. A moment of dizziness came over him as his eyes panned the rising breadth of the great hall. The intricate artwork built within the architecture amazed him. Carved within the framework of the ceiling dome, emerged glorious marble statues of the gods and goddesses worshiped by the Torea people. Alek counted five, three females and two males, and recognized one of the goddesses from the chapel in Oremann.

He nudged Sir Garwin, who hid his face under his hood, and asked him softly, "Tell me of your gods."

Garwin answered, "First you should know, they are a family. Brothers and sisters. We call them The Family of Five." He pointed to the female statue clad in rippling fabric. "She is Zo'ah, goddess of wood and stone. She is wisdom."

Her statue resembled one Alek had previously seen: flowing robes, hands clasping a staff of knotted wood. "I recall seeing this icon in Oremann."

"Indeed, the Oremann people have always worshipped her. With the Wrathrock Mountains over them, it is her will that protects that city. Then there's her sister, Pellaan." This statue had long hair that flowed around her and spread throughout the entire surface of the ceiling, swirling and billowing like clouds. Her hands cradled an hourglass. "She is the goddess of the sky. The seasons and storms are hers to command and her children are the sun and moon, or day and night. As such, Pellaan is time.

"The third sister is Norea, goddess of fire and water; two opposing elements that destroy and create. All beings need her blessings to thrive. Thus, she is life." Norea wore a gown carved as tendrils of fire. Her tresses of hair fell over her shoulders like a waterfall.

Alek said, "You have many goddesses. They embody such strong aspects. Why?"

Garwin gave a small smile from under his hood. "Because women are stronger than men. Simple as that."

"So the goddesses are more powerful than the gods?"

"Yes."

"Tell me more. Who is that god?" Alek pointed to a large male whose muscular form leaned on the end of a large war axe. Around his neck, hung a necklace of fangs. His hair was a curled mane stopping at his shoulders.

"Gladen is the god of the animals. The spirit of all wild things comes from him. Hunter and master of arms, he is the great survivor. He is strength and power." Garwin paused. "Perhaps I have Gladen to thank for my fate. Curse or blessing, I am still alive. That means a great deal. It is the final god that I am glad to have not met."

The last of the towering statues kept his hands clasped before him,

as if in prayer. He wore an amulet of a skull around his neck and thin dagger on his belt.

“He is Brakore, the guardian of the honor bound to the grave. Bringer of peace, ender of pain, he is the watchful god of mercy. He is death,” said Garwin.

The eyes of the grim icon stared into Alek’s but he did not feel fear. A sense of serenity eclipsed his heart, leaving a feeling of clarity resonating throughout. As a warrior, he knew not to fear death. It is contradictory. To embrace the way of the sword is to embrace the skill to kill. To wield a weapon is to wield death. No matter what god a person prays to, what afterlife he believes in, Death is constant and, on the battlefield, makes all men equal.



The group waited in the center of the great hall. Soft chairs and small tables formed a reception area for guests of the royal house. A few minutes passed and Commander Fathion rose from his seat to greet an approaching man clad in blue and gold finery.

Commander Fathion bowed and said, “Steward Cullen Rosen; it is an honor.” The knights bowed to show their respect for the king’s advisor.

Steward Rosen shook Fathion’s hand. “It’s nice to see you again, Commander. How long has it been? Four years?”

“Six, I’m afraid.”

“Pellaan’s will, how the years escape us.”

Like Fathion, Steward Rosen wore the years of service on his face. He kept his long gray hair combed back and tied with a strip of silk. Alek admired the jeweled sword and scabbard hanging from his hip. The steward approached and shook Oscar’s hand. “Welcome to Castle Torea, outsider. By your garb alone, I’d call you a man of magic.”

“Indeed. My name is Oskar. I am the High Mage of my homeland.” Oskar nodded to Alek. “Allow me to introduce my friend, and fellow citizen of Calmoren Kingdom.”

Alek stepped forward. “I am Alek, son of Borlan.”

Steward Rosen eyed the warrior with an upturned nose and pursed upper lip, then returned his attention to Fathion.

“Commander,” the steward said, “The king received your report from Silt a day ago. He briefed me on the content of your letter and instructed that I send for you. Since you’ve come on your own, we’ve gained a great deal of time and I am compelled to inform the king of your arrival at once. There is much he wishes to know, as I’m sure you can imagine.”

Alek did not like the steward’s haughty tone. He decided that the bejeweled sword on the man’s hip was merely for show. He

interrupted, "How does one become steward? Through knightly arts? Prowess on the battlefield?"

Steward Rosen stiffened and stammered a reply, "Well, one has to . . . I mean one must be . . . that is to say I—"

Alek nodded. "Never mind. I think I understand."

Oskar nudged Alek and sent him a look of stern disapproval.

Fathion stepped in front of Alek and said, "Tell me Steward, what is the state of the people?"

Steward Rosen cleared his throat. "The people are worried, but are remaining vigilant. King Foss has given an official statement to the public regarding the attacks on the two cities."

"It's three now."

"What?"

"Since my report from Silt, Crownwater suffered an attack. Thanks to Alek, Oskar, and Sir Garwin, the lake city prevailed."

Alek recalled the battle with the terrible serpent. Memory conjured the taste of murky lake water in his mouth. He could almost feel the fine grains of mud lining his teeth. He would never forget the trap of the dead monster's mouth.

The steward's expression hardened. "Perhaps we haven't gained time after all." He paused and rubbed the corners of his eyes. "The people are talking about Oremann and Silt. Those damnable bards have already begun spinning tales in taverns. We can talk more tonight. Please wait here. I'll inform His Majesty that you've arrived."

Steward Rosen excused himself and made his way to the royal suite. Fathion dismissed his band of knights, saying, "Brothers, secure rooms at the inn. Rest and have your armor and weapons cleaned. Wait at the inn for further orders. Garwin, you stay with me."

**K**ing Foss appeared at the top of the center staircase. Two guards clad in steel armor bearing halberds accompanied him. Commander Fathion dropped to one knee and bowed his head; Garwin, Alek and Oskar did the same.

One of the armored men announced, "Presenting King Yolfere Foss the third, ruler of Torea Kingdom; you may rise."

Though an old man, King Foss postured with chest bowed and shoulders back. His curls of white hair came below his bearded jaw line. He wore a gold cloak lined in silver that draped over his flowing white robes. Sapphire jewels adorned his crown, which was fashioned from gold-flaked bone.

The king panned the group. "Greetings and welcome to Castle Torea." King Foss turned to Commander Fathion. "I am glad you've come. And pleased that you've brought the outsiders with you." He addressed the group. "Steward Rosen informed me that you've traveled from Crownwater. That road is long and you must be tired. There is much to discuss. Join me in the dining hall."

The spread of warm rolls, boiling stew, crisp vegetables, and seasoned meats filled the dining hall with an intoxicating aroma. Servants poured mugs of ale, honeyed milk and set decanters of spiced tea.

"Eat and drink all that you will," the king offered. "Then we will talk about how I mean to crush our enemy."



Garwin watched King Foss light a long pipe and puff smoky clouds into the air around him. He leaned back, one hand holding the pipe, the other resting on the pommel of his sword.

"I have prayed to Brakore every night since I learned of the tragedy of Oremann. It seems he has answered my prayers by sending you two." The king pointed his pipe at Oskar and Alek.

"Two days ago, I sent a force of fifty men to Oremann to reclaim the mine and secure the town. Services for the victims and their families will be forthcoming once order is restored, the mine is manned, and the great Oremann forge is roaring again." He smoked

for a moment then continued. "Silt is another matter, Commander. I've sent orders for your outpost to monitor the river and its banks. No one is to come down the Laughing River until Silt's guard clears them. Furthermore, the knights will patrol the northern reaches, along the wood line of the Forest of Iniquity.

"Now that I've learned of Crownwater's trouble, I will send additional workers to assist in repairing the dam. I would like to thank you, Oskar. If not for your talents, the dam would have crumbled and my kingdom would be underwater."

Oskar bowed his head respectfully. The king then pointed his pipe at Alek. "Your ferocious blade ended the witch's serpent. Peace returned by the stroke of your sword. Thank you."

"You're welcome, good king. Though, it was the courage of Sir Garwin that drove the monster's maw over my steel," said Alek.

Garwin lowered his hooded head. The king had not yet looked upon him. King Foss put down his pipe and stood up. "Come forward, knight."

Garwin rose from his chair. He advanced, coming to stand mere feet from the king. He kept his gaze low, not wanting to reveal his inhuman face.

"Why have you not spoken to me, knight? Nor have you taken down your hood."

Garwin replied in a raspy voice, "Even in your honorable presence, in this great keep, I suffer, my lord. I, too, have fallen victim to the witch. I fear what I have become; but more so, I fear your refusal."

The king reached up and rolled back Garwin's hood. His brown mane fell out from under the heavy fabric. King Foss did not recoil. He studied Garwin's face. Even Garwin realized his snout had grown to protrude, more like a dog's. He ran a hand through his mane and for the first time felt his long ears. The king took one of Garwin's hands and examined the dreadful claws.

The room fell silent as the king assessed the man-beast. Oskar pursed his lips and raised his brow in sympathy. Moments of truth give rise to moments of judgment, and Garwin could not help but wonder what the king saw in him.

King Foss pulled his gleaming sword from the scabbard. "Kneel before me, knight."

Though afraid of what the king meant to do, Garwin remained loyal. He did not ask questions. He dropped to his knees and hung his head. The weight of his loyal heart, which now resonated in his core like the rumble of a steady war drum, nearly toppled him at the king's feet. He used a single clawed hand to brace his massive frame. *To die now, he thought, at the hand of my king, would surely restore the honor of my soul.*

King Foss lifted his blade and held it over his head. "You have served Torea selflessly and valiantly. The truth of it is you are cursed. The witch means to claim your strong soul for her own. I refuse her. You are a son of Torea. I, King Yolfere Foss, will vanquish the torment from your heart with the sword of my fathers."

He brought the blade down upon Garwin's shoulders. The steel edge chimed as it kissed the metal clasps of his cloak. "Rise, Sir Antius Garwin. You are no more a knight, but stand now as Captain of the Knights of Torea Kingdom. Let all soldiers who wear the sun and seven stars heed your call."

"You have given me purpose and filled my heart with happiness. No mirror will ever tarnish my self-worth. Thank you, my lord. I will serve you with honor," Garwin said, rising.

"As you have. From this day on, you will reside here in Castle Torea and assist in the deliberation and coordination of all events concerning the defense of this kingdom. The Outpost Commanders are at your service."

The king then spoke to Steward Rosen. "Send word to the six cities and all outposts that there is a new captain. Later, have Captain Garwin fitted in royal battle raiment." He turned back to the group and said, "Let's talk of war."

Alek slammed his fist on the table. "At last."



The king led the group to a large square chamber where a massive rectangular table nearly filled the room. A rolling green and blue model landscape of the kingdom unfolded over the surface. The mountains were made of cut stone; the forests, whittled from boughs, seemed to sway in an imaginary wind. The reflective blue paint gave the illusion of shimmering water. Every city had miniature representation. Towers, castles, battlements, buildings and even tiny shacks all had a place. Wooden ships clustered around the royal waterfront and far to the east, lay a gray and rocky flatland.

The king had positioned red flags in the cities of Oremann and Silt to mark the witch's attacks. He then placed a marker at Crownwater and sat down at the table's head.

"Three attacks," King Foss said, "beginning from west and trailing east. Why?"

Commander Fathion moved forward to reply, but Captain Garwin held up his hand, ordering him to hold silent.

Captain Garwin said, "The people of Oremann released the witch from her tomb in the Wrathrock Mountains. Her attacks follow her journey back to her homeland, the Barrens. Oskar can explain more."

Oskar nodded. "Thank you, Captain. The witch, Lorelei, is a



survivor of a forgotten empire once called Everheart. We believe she has found the ruins of Everheart and is regaining her power. There is more that you should know to fully understand this enemy.”

“I wish to know everything regarding the threat over my land. Only then can I rightly protect my people. Continue.”

“The first aspect is that Alek and I do not hail from a neighboring kingdom, rather a neighboring realm.”

“What are you saying, mage?”

“There are many worlds, many realms. They exist, side-by-side. This brings me to the second part.”

“Go on.”

“Alek has a brother who is a highly skilled mage. So great is his mastery of magic, that he can no longer be called mage; sorcerer is more fitting, I’m afraid. His name is Darren. I was once his teacher.

“Well, in our world, we know a legend; it is a poem about Torea. This poem foretells of the demise of Torea Kingdom at the hands of a terrible witch.”

“This is unspeakable and absolutely unbelievable!” King Foss nearly hollered.

Captain Garwin interjected, “They speak the truth, my lord. What has happened to me is proof that the witch’s power cannot be argued.”

The king gazed across his model. “Oskar, please go on.”

“As you wish.” Oskar cleared his throat. “Darren used his powers to open the Gateway of Realms. We tried to stop him but he hurled us into it. We discovered we had landed in Torea in the days just after the awakening of the witch. We believe Darren is helping Lorelei; that an alliance has been formed between them.”

The king leaned forward in his chair. “So it is two enemies we face.”

Oskar nodded and went on. “The last detail may hold a sliver of hope. Regarding the legend of Torea, it is said the people of Everheart forged a magic sword, one that absorbs dark magic. It is called the Everblade, and was lost with the empire. If we can find the sword, we might gain a valuable weapon against both Lorelei and Darren.”

Garwin anxiously paced the perimeter of the long table. He looked thoughtfully at the model kingdom as Oskar spoke. His eyes focused on the Barrens.

“But we must find the ruins of the fabled city first,” King Foss confirmed. “I doubt there is time enough for an expedition such as that.” He folded his arms and furled his brow. A long minute passed while he sat in thought.

“I will not wait to deal with this enemy. Thrice she has attacked and wounded Torea. It is time to crush her. I will send my war fleet to

the southeastern coastline and unleash an army into the Barrens. We will keep the city of Eastwatch stocked and fit to serve as the lead outpost for this campaign. My forces will march in and pull her from whatever cave she is dwelling in. I'll have her head in a matter of days."

"Your Majesty," Garwin said, still staring at the barren lands as if the key to defeating their enemies hid within the model. "She is a sorceress; we fight an ancient magic not another army."

"What do you propose then, Captain?"

Garwin waved a clawed hand over the Barrens. "Send a small scouting party to search for the ruins of Everheart and its sword."

"I will not chase ghosts, Captain. Too many have died already. There is value in the account shared by Oskar, but I will not make decisions based off the grim myths of another realm. I'll adhere to what is known—we're under attack and our enemy is in the east. I've made my decision. Ready the fleet, crew and recruit all knights not assigned to the defense of the city. You have three days, and then you will depart for war. My orders are as follows; take the fleet far to the east. Then, raid the Barrens, sweeping that desolate land until the witch is found and slain. Do you understand?"

Garwin bowed. "Yes, my lord." He turned to Fathion. "Prepare the warships at once."

Garwin wondered if his inhuman features revealed his disapproval of the king's plan. An outward assault against enemies of this nature could prove disastrous. It was not right. If it were up to him, he'd fortify the capital city to protect the people and keep the fleet along the Sterling Bay. If the witch sought to take over Torea, she would have to overtake the castle. He found it egregious not to devote all resources to its defense. He thought then of the serpent and the impact it had on Crownwater. He tried not to imagine what other monsters Darren and Lorelei might conjure.

Fathion bowed to Garwin then knelt before the king. King Foss waved for him to rise and said, "You're dismissed, Commander."

King Foss prepared to take leave. "Thank you all for your service thus far. I am anxious to end this madness. Until then, you are to be royal guests in the castle. Whatever you need, Steward Rosen will make it so."

Oskar stepped forward. "I have one request, if I may?"

Steward Rosen replied, "Of course. What can I do for you?"

"I would like very much to meet with Torea's mages. Is that possible?"

"Yes, that would be fine. There are six towers to Castle Torea, one to honor each city; this portion of the castle, the king's keep, represents Torea City. You'll find our league of mages working out of

Greatfalls Tower, just off the southeast wing. Any of the castle attendants will gladly guide you.”

After the king had left the room, Alek said to Garwin, “We cannot combat sorcery with warships and cannon fire.”

“I understand, Alek,” Garwin replied.

“But does your king?”

Garwin lowered his voice. “You and I are in agreement on this, but I cannot challenge King Foss. It is my duty to see that his orders are carried out.”

Alek’s eyes narrowed and his jaw tensed.

Garwin’s attention fell again to the model of Torea behind him. His mind wandered in the tiny roads and miniature farms. The clustered cities came to life in his imagination. He knew every corner of this land and the model kindled memories everywhere. Alek reached down and knocked over the likeness of Castle Torea. Garwin glared at him.

“You see how easy that was?” Alek asked. “It will be just as easy for my brother to do the same thing. To him, your kingdom is nothing more than a toy capable of being used, broken and discarded.”

“What would you ask of me then?”

“All I ask is that, while serving your king, you remember it is not only Torea that is threatened by Darren and Lorelei.”

Garwin nodded his understanding and for the first time, he saw worry in Alek’s eyes. At least Garwin knew the state of his land. Alek, far from home, had no idea what, if anything, had become of Calmoren.



Not pleased with the king's battle plan, Alek left the castle in favor of strolling the city. He declined Oskar's offer to visit the Torea mages. He had no interest in the arcane arts. As he ambled through the busy roads and crowded marketplace, he tried to understand the king's reasoning for a blind assault into enemy territory. Try as he may, he found no basis for such a reckless decision.

*Who knows what waits in the Barrens? Sorcery is unpredictable. Magic has no edge to meet with your own. What good are arms and armor if one stands against a spell? Foolish king.*

His walk brought him into the south district marked by a large white statue of Norea. Beyond the towering goddess, the streets smoothed, and stone walkways led out over arching bridges and bowed terraces. This was a place of lofty scenic overlooks where one could view the ships sailing in and out of the bay or admire the vast ocean.

The royal war fleet waited in the harbor below. From the height of an overlook, Alek saw dozens of men hurrying about the waterfront. He guessed they were following Commander Fathon's directions. *If preparations for war are underway, thought Alek, perhaps I should get ready as well. It has been a while since the fight with the serpent and a sword drill might help me relax.* He pulled his sword from its scabbard and inspected its edges. Sharp and clean. He swung it around his head and out in front, as if slicing the head from an imaginary foe. A sharp pinch in his shoulder affirmed his need for the exercise.



Oskar was warmly welcomed by Torea's League of Mages. The most skilled of Torea's mages, a man named Ellon, told him that he found his knowledge of the magical arts impressive.

Oskar sat with the group of scholars in a circle of soft chairs. They sipped tea and smoked from long pipes. Topics of illusions, conjuring, rituals, and spells were discussed at length. Oskar was delighted that they wanted to learn more of the principal of spell pulsing. Teaching magic had a way of banishing his troubles and melting away his stress.

“Being able to listen to the rhythm of magic is the only real way a mage can interpret the properties of a spell,” Oskar said.

Ellon dipped the nib of his pen into a jar of ink, and then pressed it to the page of his journal. “Go on, master Oskar.”

“I am no master,” Oskar replied. “I don’t believe, nor do I teach, that a mortal can ever truly master magic. The forces of the world are always changing, knowledge is always being perfected and new lessons are learned every day.” He sipped his tea. “This is quite good; an intriguing blend. As I was saying—every spell has a pulse, a beat all its own, that indicates its nature. Depending on the magical properties, like fire, ice, wind, etcetera, the sound will correlate.”

Ellon’s brow dipped. “Where does this rhythm come from?”

“Fair of you to ask. As you know, to cast a spell, a mage uses the spark of his life energy to ignite the internal magic that he has cultivated through study and training. So it is that all spells are alive; though not in the sense of consciousness, you understand. The cadence of the caster’s heartbeat can be heard and felt in the essence of the spell, if you tune your mind to hear it. Remember, all spells resonate with the elemental properties that comprise them.”

“Can it be assumed then, that all spells have different rhythms since all casters are different?” Ellon asked.

“Yes and no; it can be argued. First, one could say that all spells are the same, regardless of who casts them. Here’s an example I use in my classes: consider two musicians, singers, each singing the same song. The only differences you’ll hear are the differences of the voices. The tone and pitch. But if the song is sung the way it is known, then the inflections of both voices will be the same. The song will be recognizable by all who hear it. If I cast a spell of fire and you do the same, both fires will burn, whose is brighter or hotter, is not important. Fire is fire.”

“And the other side of the argument, that all spells are different; what of that?”

“Let’s go back to our two singers, each singing the same song. Tone and pitch are not the only aspects of the music. Just as the element of fire is not the only aspect in the previously mentioned spell. There are two key components to the singer’s voice that should be considered. Talent and volume. So, the song that is sung by the one may be heard by more people than the song sung by the other; but the voice of the other may be more enjoyed.”

Oskar paused, noticing the mages feverishly scribing his words in their journals. He gave them time to capture the lesson. He finished his tea and placed the cup on the small table at his side.

A young apprentice came with a silver decanter. “More to drink, Professor Oskar?”

Oskar smiled. “Why don’t you just leave the whole pot right here. That would be fine, my boy. Oh, and tell me, what is this delicious blend?”

“It is called Rime Root. It comes from the rime flower, which only grows in the snowy peaks of Pellaan’s Mountains. Would you care for a pouch to take on your travels?”

“I would much enjoy that. Thank you.” Oskar noticed the mages had finished writing and eagerly awaited the continuation of his lesson. He rubbed his chin.

“Where was I . . . ah, yes . . . the two points to always consider when identifying a spell are similar to talent and volume. They are skill and power. As for the spell of fire, yours may burn hotter because you’ve used a greater amount of power. Though, mine may burn longer due to more focused skill. So, it can be argued that all spells are different. What is irrefutable is this—the properties of all spells are a product of the skill and power of the caster. Though elementally, those properties will always be the same. Learning to hear the rhythm of spells can tell you many things. Most importantly, what it is, and finally how strong it is. You see?”

The circle of mages clapped in admiration. Ellon said, “Long has it been since we’ve had such a good discussion. I’d like to visit your realm and attend one of your seminars someday, Oskar.”

Oskar nodded. “You are welcome in my school. And it would be a joy to study with this league as well.”

Ellon put down his journal and poured the old mage more tea. “I suspect that you’ve come to Greatfalls Tower with intentions other than chatting with us. To what do we owe the honor of your visit?”

“I am interested in the origins of your magic. You see, my skills are elemental in nature. The magic I’ve witnessed and felt here is very similar, but there is something unique about it.”

“We study elemental disciplines as well but we base our practice on spiritual magic.” Ellon cleared his throat. “Let me explain. Elemental power is nothing more than the spirit of the land and nature. It is raw and when combined, like primary colors, can become many hues, or potencies. Elemental magic provides a spectrum of magic. But spiritual magic provides the shade. It lightens and darkens the caster’s will. If I may build on your fire example . . .”

Oskar nodded. “Please do.”

“The fire burns when conjured. But for what purpose? Is the caster creating or destroying? Is he warming or searing? Intent, Oskar. Intent comes from the heart and the heart hears only the will of the spirit. So, we discipline our hearts and tune its ear to hear the precise command of our spirit. When magic is fueled from the heart, rather than the mind, it is limited only by the caster’s will rather than his

knowledge.”

Oskar considered this for a moment. “So a fire spell conjured through ability is weaker than one conjured through desire?”

“Yes. And where does desire come from?”

“The heart.”

“Correct. And what commands the heart?”

“The spirit.”

“Then what has the magic become?”

“Spiritual magic.”

Ellon sat back. “Precisely. When you cast a spell next, focus on your desire for doing so and let it blend with the potency of the elemental charge. You’ll find the spell to be much stronger.”

Oskar leaned back, contemplating this. Linking desire with spell casting was a profound concept.



Alek found his way to the castle training center, a courtyard containing pells for sword practice, archery targets, balance beams, and a sparring circle. Racks of wooden training weapons, shields, and unsharpened blades lined the area. Alek found more complex training arms: halberds, battleaxes, maces, whips, spears, and bows of varying strengths rested on tables, all ready with stocked quivers.

He paced the quiet training yard, expecting to find a group of knights honing their skills or maybe young men learning the ways of the sword. He took up a wooden blade and held it straight out with his right hand. The balance and weight mimicked the real thing. He swung it in a wide curve from his right shoulder to his left knee, then scoffed. Not satisfied with its functionality, he placed it back on the rack. “If not a child, why train with a false blade?” he muttered.

A voice from behind startled him. “I don’t like them either.”

Alek spun around to find a woman standing in the training yard. Her long auburn hair fell from its tie; tresses of reddish brown waved in her face. She approached Alek, studying him with piercing green eyes. As she drew near, Alek smelled her clean, floral scent.

She wore a tight leather cuirass, proper for martial practice, and tall brown boots laced to her knees. Under the leather armor, a white cotton blouse billowed, with sleeves that belled at her wrists. A sturdy black belt held a silver broadsword that chimed against her thigh as she walked.

“Come to train?” she asked.

For a moment, Alek could not form a reply. Her beauty had him awestruck. She met him with firm eyes. She held her chin high and kept her left hand atop the pommel of her resting blade. The woman brushed a strand of hair from her face, tucking it behind her ear.

"I asked you a question."

Alek's clarity returned. "Yes, I'm here to train. And you?"

"I don't carry a sword because it's fashionable," she said.

Alek chuckled. "No, I suppose not. It fits you well."

"Thank you. My father gave this sword to me when I became old enough to swing it. She's beautiful."

"As are you." Alek put out his hand. "My name is Alek. And you are?"

She took his hand. "Your training partner." She pulled away and drew her blade.

Alek took a step back, confused. The conversation had quickly become swordplay with steel. "Forgive me if I was too forward. I did not mean to offend."

"No offense taken. Now, brandish your blade."

"I don't wish to duel with you."

The woman shrugged. "Then stand there and get hacked to bits. The choice is yours, Alek." She charged him, blade outstretched.

Alek dashed to the side, barely dodging her deadly point. She recovered and spun to ready her blade against him. He drew his sword and clutched the grip with two hands. The steel gleamed in the sun. The woman sprang forward again, leaping and slicing down, as though meaning to cleave his skull. Alek stepped into her attack. He caught the edge of her falling blade with the flat of his own, bracing it horizontally. Their edges slid over one another, but Alek wound his blade over hers, pinning her weapon to the ground. Weaponless, she rolled aside.

Alek picked up her sword and twirled it mockingly. "You're as good as dead now, woman."

She ran for him, leapt, and rolled in the air. Her agility impressed him but the admiration ended abruptly when her boot slammed into his face. The kick was direct and devastating. Alek's head snapped back; he fell to the ground, dropping both swords. Blood poured from his nose and pooled in the dirt. He heard the ringing of steel next to his ear and saw the edge of her blade inches from his face.

"Now who's as good as dead?" she asked with a laugh. She drove his blade into the ground beside his head. "Keep training, warrior."

Alek spat a glob of blood and sat up. He watched her walk away, her hips swaying, her hair trailing in the warm wind.



Night fell over Torea. King Foss insisted that the royal guests be honored in a night of fine dining and music. Prior to the evening's event, Alek and Oskar received their formal attire for the dinner party. Alek felt awkward in the crisp white blouse. The V-neck collar tapered



to a ruffled fringe and silver stitched embroidery lined the hem. The tight black leggings restricted his legs and the tall black boots felt stiff. Alek met Oskar in the hallway, outside their respective chamber doors.

“Where have you been all day?” Oskar asked.

Alek pulled at his tight leggings, hoping to stretch them. “In the training yard getting humbled.”

“I see that from your swollen lip and the bruising around your cheek.” Oskar motioned for Alek to follow. “Let’s go to the dining hall. Don’t want to keep the king, or his dignitaries, waiting.”

“Dignitaries? I thought this was a simple gathering.”

“Not at all. King Foss wishes for us to meet the barons of the six cities. I should add that this is an event free of arms. So if you’re carrying so much as a dagger, you’d best leave it behind.”

“Don’t worry about me.”

Oskar chuckled. “I always worry about you, my boy.”

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“don’t know where it is,” Lorelei insisted, nearly shouting. “You can search my memory but you’ll see that I speak the truth. The Everblade is lost, buried among the ruins of Everheart.”

Darren slid over to her and pulled her waist against his. He caressed the side of her pale face. “And lost it must remain.” He conjured the Gateway of Realms on the other side of the room. It crackled, and whirled as it drew in bits of broken stone and tufts of dust.

“Where are you going, my lord? Must you leave me tonight?” Lorelei asked.

“There is someone I must meet.”

Lorelei followed him to the gateway to stand in the threshold. Darren could see the enchantment beaming in her eyes at the sight of the conduit. He knew its powerful energy compelled her, taunted her. The command over the gateway was his most dramatic tool for keeping her under him. She could not learn that he was not truly a god.

“Can’t I go with you?” Lorelei asked. “How I wish to see worlds beyond, worlds we might conquer.”

“One world at a time. My personal endeavors mustn’t concern you now. After all, you’ve got plans to make and I don’t want you distracted. You’re now strong enough to take over Torea City.”

“The kingdom will be mine soon enough.”

“As it is meant to be.” The gateway hissed as he stepped further into it. Halfway through, he turned back to her. “You’ve failed too many times, Lorelei. Do not fail in Torea City.”

“Tell me, my lord. How would you claim the capital city?”

Darren smirked. “Quite simple, really. I’d walk up to the king and slit his throat.”

## Chapter 12



Alek had survived battles against legions of opposing warriors and duels with cutthroat thieves. Though not even the fight against the Crownwater serpent made him feel as tense as when he stepped into the royal dining hall dressed in Torea finery. A man of the sword did not belong among wine-sipping nobles and kingdom magistrates.

All eyes followed him and Oskar as an attendant escorted them to their seats at the long banquet table. Alek panned the guests already seated.

The six Barons of Torea Kingdom, each wearing uniquely colored tabards, sat along the table's length. The men offered warm greetings to the Calmorens, and then resumed their discussion. A flag bearer entered the room and called out, "Presenting his majesty, King Yolfere Foss the third and Princess Joanell Foss."

King Foss entered the room, followed by a young woman with long curling locks of auburn hair. She wore a corseted yellow gown trimmed in blue and silver embroidery. A thin wrap of white silk dressed her shoulders. Sparkling jewels hung from her ears and adorned her neck and wrists. A silver tiara rested atop her head. Her emerald eyes met Alek's with a wink. Despite her royal attire, Alek recognized her from the training yard.

The princess and the king sat at the table head.

"Welcome, all," King Foss said. "It is with great pride that we meet tonight to honor the men who have kept a hostile force at bay. Family of Five, gods and goddesses of our land, praise these guests of honor—swordsmen Alek and mage Oskar of Calmoren Kingdom." He lifted his goblet in salutations. The Barons did the same.

King Foss went on with his opening speech but Alek heard none of it. He could not pull his eyes or thoughts from the beautiful princess. He had seen many pretty women over the years, some more so than others. But she was beyond them, as if made of something finer, right down to the line of her shoulders, the arch of her back as she sat, and the way her hair shined in the light of the candles. Her eyes darted about the room, glistening like wet jewels that seemed to glow with a secret fire that only he could see. Her lips smiled for the guests, moist and shimmering like the petals of a dew-laden rose. The princess

found his eyes and her cheeks turned pink.

The king's voice boomed in Alek's ears, shattering his captivation. "And let's dine and dance to help banish dark thoughts and ill will. It is my wish to cast aside talk of the enemy and words of war on this night. Time enough for that in the days to come." He lifted his goblet and took a drink.

At that, servers brought out on polished silver trays cuts of roasted pig, decorated pheasant, racks of ribs, smoked fish, bowls of hearty stew, fresh bread, and baskets of fruits and vegetables.



Throughout the night, Princess Joanell met Alek's glances across the table. He seemed to care little that drops of ale dribbled from his chin or that strips of seared chicken skin dangled from the corner of his mouth while he chewed and spoke.

For most of the evening, Joanell thought the warrior rude and unmannered. Though, as the night went on, she observed that he maintained his natural tendencies regardless of the finery he wore and the company surrounding him. It impressed her that he did not wish to impress. This man, this Alek of Calmoren, was true to himself. She felt the urge to cast aside her tiara and loosen her corset. Her heeled shoes hurt and the ribbon in her hair pulled too tight. She imagined letting loose like Alek, there in front of her father and his barons. The very thought of it, however brief, made her smile.

Princess Joanell had spent her childhood dreaming of her mother, Queen Loretta. King Foss spoke only words of endearment and shared happy stories. He reminded her often just how much Loretta had loved her. Still, Joanell wondered what kind of a relationship she would have had with her and how different she might have grown to be.

Being raised by a king, she took an early interest in knightly sports. While the other girls learned to cook, sew and garden, Joanell could be found at the archery range, sword pell or riding through the highlands on horseback. When she was old enough, she joined her father each month to watch the combat games at the arena. There, men fought bloody duels for hefty purses or to clear their names of wrong doings. While the king cheered on the battles, young Joanell sat in silence, observing, learning.

So it was that the young girl grew to be two people—a warrior and princess. The latter proved more time consuming. Though she began weapons training early on and could ride a horse better than most knights by ten years old, there were still academics and etiquette lessons that she could not evade. Her father never denied her anything but enforced a simple rule: for every hour spent in the weapons yard, two must be spent in the academic hall learning the customs of royal

court. Though not as fun as crushing the boys in the sparring circle, she took her books seriously.

Alek guzzled down a tall mug of ale. When he finished, he wiped his mouth with his sleeve and smiled at her. She rolled her eyes and began chatting with the baron beside her.

When dinner concluded, the festivities commenced outside on a large terrace high above the ocean. Balconies stretched out at the corners. Additional court musicians grouped near the doorway to the castle hall and played elegant melodies with violins, cellos, flutes, and harps.

Alek leaned in the doorway and watched as the royal guests took to dancing, something he hadn't done in a long time. His eyes followed Princess Joanell as she mingled. When Oskar met him, cradling a steaming mug in his palms, Alek said, "The princess has an attitude."

"An attitude you admire or detest?"

"I'm not sure yet."

"She looks like a beautiful, gentle lady to me, Alek."

"You've got one right."

"This is the perfect time to talk to her. Maybe go for a walk under the stars?"

"I don't go for walks under the stars."

Oskar chuckled. "It seems without your sword, you lack courage."

Alek smirked. "When it comes to her, you're probably right." He paused and watched her tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear. He recalled her doing the same thing in the training yard. "There's something about her. Something that makes me . . ."

"Weak?"

"No. Nothing can do that."

Oskar brought his mug to his lips. "Oh, yes. I forgot."



Alek decided that Oskar was right. It was the perfect time to talk to her. He found her lingering near the dance floor, and as he moved through the guests toward her, he hoped for a better meeting than their first. Alek did his best to control his racing heart as he approached.

"Good evening, my lady."

"Are you enjoying yourself, Alek?" she asked.

"This is a much nicer time than what you showed me in the training yard." He rubbed at his swollen lip.

She smirked.

"Tell me, my lady, why did you not introduce yourself when we met? Had I known you were the princess, I would have—"

She interrupted, "That's exactly why. I didn't want you to do

anything. You wouldn't have entertained me in sport had you known I was the daughter of the king. That's always the way of it."

"I understand. Though, now that I know who you are, it only makes me want to entertain you more." He held out his callused hand. "Will you dance with me?"

"I'd be honored, but in the spirit of honesty, I am not much of a dancer."

Alek's eyes widened. "A woman as lovely as you cannot dance?"

He noticed her cheeks turning pink. "Lower your voice, warrior," she said. "It's not something I wish to be announced."

Alek chuckled and took her hand in his. "Let me give you a little training."

Before she could refuse, he pulled her to the center of the room, twirling her about, wrapping her in his arms. She had seen many ways to embrace in dance, but none as close as this. With his left hand in her right and his arm tight around her waist, Alek moved her body in time with the music. He leaned close to whisper in her ear. "One . . . two . . . three," he counted the beats. "Right heel back, side-step left, turn your hips to face the right."

His voice soothed her apprehension. It was deep and seemed to resonate through his chest and into her as he held her to him. His gold hair fell against her cheek and she inhaled the lingering scent of a faraway wind, the pine of foreign forests and faint traces of smoke from so many campfires. His solid body felt warm, like a living statue. In the furthest chamber of her mind, that dim room reserved only for her most private of thoughts, she imagined him waiting.

She stumbled then. He caught her.

"You see, I just don't have the coordination for this."

"Nonsense. Stay with me and follow my lead. You're doing fine." He squeezed her hand in his to reassure her. The music carried on. "Let's try it another way. Feel my hand in yours," he said. "Imagine it is the handle of your sword."

She laughed.

"I'm being serious, my lady. Now, go along with it."

"I'm sorry," she said playfully. "Go ahead, Instructor."

"My hand is your sword. The enemy faces you. He lunges . . ."

Her right heel slid back.

"He cuts upward."

She side-stepped to the left.

"He recoils and squares off."

She turned her hips to face the right.

Alek smiled. "Well done!"

Picturing Alek's scenario, her body moved on reflex. Her combat skills made her footwork light and free. The most fundamental fight

steps became the framework of a dance. They danced for several minutes. They laughed together, sharing the playful joy of the event.

When the music ceased, they pulled away from one another. Joanell took both of his hands in hers. "Thank you. That was fun."

"You're welcome. It was an honor to dance with the Princess of Torea."

"With you, I am just Joanell. Can it be that way?"

Alek caressed her face with his palm. "I would like that."



Later in the night, Joanell's father called her away to socialize with dignitaries. Alek bid her a good night and made his way onto one of the balconies to clear his mind and regain his focus. The cool wind carried the hush of the sea to his ears. The lapping of the waves against the rocks far below the balcony sounded like sleepy, oceanic breaths. Alek's hair rustled atop his shoulders as he looked up at the dark sky. Clouds hid the moon and stars.

He thought he was alone until a voice whispered on the wind, "Enjoying the evening?"

Alek spun around. The shadows gathered like a living pool of black vapor. From it, a hooded figure took shape, stepping out and materializing to a solid form. The figure reached up and drew back his hood.

Through clenched teeth, Alek said, "Darren."

"Hello brother," Darren said. Shadows hung under his eyes. Though they resembled each other, the differences were apparent. Alek's physical stature dwarfed his brother's. Alek's face wore harder edges while Darren's features angled.

Darren approached with the confidence of a king. "It's good to see you well, Alek."

Alek scoffed. "What is your business here?"

Darren floated to the balcony and peered over the edge. The wind stirred his robe and cloak. "I've come to bring you home."

Alek could hardly believe what he heard. He offered no response but instead, looked back at the dinner party. Princess Joanell talked with Oskar.

"Forget her. The princess will die with the rest of this world. It's their fate, remember?" Darren said.

"How can you say such a thing?"

Darren's mouth curled. "There's more to the Gateway of Realms than what is penned in the old texts. You see, when it is first opened, it requires time to sync with cadence of time. That's why you and Oskar arrived in Torea's past. Harmony between the gate and the dimensional divide had not been established when it pulled you in."

“So not only is it a passage to other worlds, but it can be used as some kind of time dial?”

“You’re smarter then you let on. The Gateway of Realms can also serve as a corridor to the past. One only needs the knowledge of a world’s history to be his compass.”

Alek glared at him.

“You treat me as though I am doing something wrong,” Darren said. “Try to understand, I did not intend to cast you and the old man here. You interrupted a powerful conjuration and got caught, like a fly in a web. At the time, I couldn’t stop it. I didn’t know how. I needed time to master the mechanics of the gateway to be able to come back for you. That’s what’s taken me so long.”

“You speak lies. I know you’ve aligned yourself with that wretched witch. You’re deceitful and power-hungry. Do you have any idea of the horror Lorelei has brought to this land, to these people?”

“It’s foretold in the Legend of Torea. Lorelei is destined to rule.”

“Jewels and gold do not sate your desire. What’s in it for you?”

“Lorelei as my queen and devoted sorceress. A union of our powers. Together, we’ll move through the Gateway of Realms and claim worlds.”

“I will stop you both.”

“The end is coming. All of those people,” Darren pointed to the terrace courtyard, “might as well be ghosts. One last chance; come home with me. After all, we are brothers.”

Alek stood before him. “We *were* brothers.” His streaking fist connected under Darren’s chin. The fierce uppercut sent the sorcerer tumbling over the balcony.

Alek peered over the edge, but Darren had vanished. He rubbed the soreness from his knuckles and rejoined the party.



Late that night, tremors of thunder and the cracks of lightning woke Alek from a troubled sleep. A storm raged outside his chamber window. He sat up, wiped the sweat from his brow, and shook off the nightmares he had been having. The wind howled as it sprayed cold rain into his room.

Alek rose from his bed to close the window. More lightning flashed, tearing across the clouded sky, igniting the rain like tiny beads of fire. The ocean broke violently over the rocky base of the castle ledge. At the window, Alek’s foot splashed in a puddle on the floor. It must have been raining for a while, he decided. Another arch of lightning lit the night. Over the rolling growl of thunder, somewhere in the storm, he heard the cawing of ravens.

Wasting no time, Alek dressed for battle and took up his sword. He



hurried to Oskar's room and kicked open the door. The old mage nearly fell out of his bed in startle.

"The witch's storm is falling over Torea City," Alek said.

Alek looked to the chamber window. Rain blew on the wind and spilled into this room as well. A red raven landed on the sill. It ruffled its feathers and folded its scarlet wings. With large, black eyes it studied Alek and Oskar. Its head tilted from side to side as it spoke a dreadful warning. "Let . . . her . . . come."

Pointing an open palm at the bird, Oskar threw forth a searing blast of fire, ensnaring the creature. The raven fluttered to the floor, squawking and shrieking, as flames devoured its feathered body. In seconds, a pile of smoking black ash remained.

Oskar gathered his robes and satchel, then followed Alek out of the room. "I'll find Garwin and alert the guards," he said. "Go warn the princess and the king."



Alek hurried up winding staircases and raced through long corridors before at last entering the royal family's private wing on the highest level of Castle Torea's keep. He found Joanell's chamber at the end of the hall, across from the large doorway to the king's suite.

Alek hammered on Joanell's door, pushed it open and hurried inside. Surprised by the intrusion, she recoiled and demanded an explanation. "What is the meaning of this?"

Alek panned the room to find Joanell's window barred. Relieved, he turned to her. She trembled in her nightgown; one hand gripping the gown closed, the other clutching a lantern. Alek rushed to her and took the lantern. "Put on your battle raiment as quickly as you can and take up your sword. The witch has come and we must warn your father. Hurry!"

Princess Joanell moved as fast as she could. Once suited and armed, she and Alek beat on the king's door. "Father, open the door," called Joanell. She knocked and called again, "Father? Are you awake?"

King Foss shouted back, "Run, Joanell. Save . . . yourself."

Alek slammed his shoulder against the door, knocking it from its hinges. They rushed into the royal suite. Darkness blanketed the rooms, and the two moved through them with caution.

"Father, where are you?"

Alek shielded his eyes when the stained glass doors to the king's balcony shattered and blew open. There, on the terrace, stood Lorelei in her black gown; at her feet, lying in a pool of rain and blood, the corpse of King Foss. Lorelei clutched the king's crown in her right hand and a bloody dagger in her left.

Joanell dropped her sword and stared at her father's body. Alek

stayed by her, eyes fixed on the witch.

“That was easier than I imagined. Now I am queen of Torea, princess.” Lorelei gave a vile smirk. “But you don’t have to call me mother.”

Before Alek could hold her back, the princess ran at the witch in a blind fury, weaponless. Lorelei shifted her stance and aimed her dagger at the princess. A beam of red light shot from the tip of the witch’s blade and struck Joanell in the chest. The light encapsulated her body, lifting her off the floor. With flick of her wrist, Lorelei pulled the trap of light toward her, carrying the princess out of the room, across the terrace and over the edge of the balcony. Joanell kicked and writhed but could not free herself from the magic ensnaring her. She screamed for Alek. The warrior wasted no more time and sprang to action. Lorelei released her magic and Joanell fell, screaming Alek’s name. He ran past the witch, who remained poised over the king’s body, and dove over the terrace rails with arms outstretched.

Alek reached for the princess as they fell and snatched her flailing wrist. He pulled her to him, bracing her body against his as tightly as he could just before they crashed into the sea. The black water swallowed them.

Alek held her as the waves tossed them about, slamming his body against unmoving stones and biting trees of coral. The rising waves lifted them to the surface. He heard her gasp and released her so she could remain above the waterline. His head ached and his eyes blurred. Salty water filled his mouth as blackness eclipsed his mind.



Oskar hurried through the castle halls searching for Captain Garwin. The roaring thunder and cracks of lightning sounded too frequent to be born of a natural storm. He could hear the ocean, breaking hard against the massive ledge supporting the castle and its royal city. Then he heard the familiar, dog-like growling and bursting of glass from further down the hall.

He stopped his stride and peered down the corridor. “Garwin,” he called, “is that you?”

A storm hound came into view, but not one that wore the armor of Torea.

Oskar filled his fists with magic, ready for the creature’s attack. It charged then, digging its black claws into the stone floor. Oskar shifted his stance to place his left foot forward, right leg back. He turned his torso, outstretched his left arm to aim his glowing palm toward the approaching beast. His right arm remained bent, hooked in to guard his midsection with a fist of reserved energy. There he stood,

in a balanced combat formation, and waited for his snarling enemy to close in.

The hound leapt for him, claws bared and maw open. Oskar unleashed his magical blast in a streaking column of gaseous, fiery light. He focused the full force of the blazing energy at the beast's breast. The attack devastated it, tearing through the torso, vaporizing its heart.

Reduced to a smoldering corpse at his feet, Oskar knelt to examine it. The tattered remnants of royal garb clung to its wrists, waist, and ankles. The fur dripped with red rain.

Growls and roars filled the night. Oskar listened to the sounds of furniture being overturned, windows shattering, and doors splitting. The chiming of steel blades and distant battle cries echoed throughout the corridors. The war for Torea had begun.

Oskar continued on, fighting his way through the castle, slaying creatures that were once Torea nobles. He killed them swiftly, sending focused beams through their hearts. It was the only way he could think of to end them with honor. He hurried toward the mages' chambers hoping to recruit their power. To his horror, he found Mage Ellon, and the others of the order, dead and dismembered.

Garwin and a small force of knights gathered in the library, fighting off a pack of hounds. The windows had blown apart in the storm; rain poured in, pooling on the floor around them. The knights struggled to keep their defensive posture without stepping in the rain. The beasts trampled through it, splashing red rain with every step.

Oskar noticed the opportunity for attack. From the doorway he called out, "Garwin, keep the storm hounds in the water. Fall back on my command."

Garwin nodded. He swung his blade in a wide, lateral arc. The beasts recoiled, stepping further into the accumulating rainwater.

Oskar shouted, "Fall back!"

The knights hurried out of the room. The hounds snarled and prepared to leap at them, but Oskar threw a crackling ribbon of lightning into the pooling water. The witch's monsters fell lifeless, smoking from their eyes and sizzling with a residual charge. Oskar could not remove the sadness from his heart but he knew it had to be done. He took a deep breath and wiped the sweat from his brow.

Garwin ordered his men to search the castle for remaining humans. The knights hurried down the hall. He asked Oskar. "Where's Alek?"

"He went for Joanell and the King."

"Then the royal family is well guarded. Follow me. We must escape the castle at once." Garwin ran across the library. Oskar hurried behind. Garwin stopped at a cold, dark fireplace. He knelt down, crawled inside, and then pushed the stone plating at the back. The

rear wall of the fireplace slid open to reveal a sloping passage.

Oskar asked, "What is this?"

"It's a chute that dumps into the ocean. Now, it's our emergency exit."

Oskar cringed. "You must be joking. I couldn't possibly—"

Garwin growled, commanding Oskar's focus. "Count to three, then follow after me." He lowered his body into the chute and slipped away.

Oskar counted, then dropped into the passage.



skar slid through the dark conduit, scraping his arms and legs. The sound of the raging ocean grew louder as his rapid descent neared its end. The opening came into view and he readied for the fall. He shot out and flailed in the air, disoriented and afraid of the drop to the wrathful sea. Then, a stone-like grip closed on his wrist, saving him from smashing to the rocks below. Oskar looked up. Garwin clung to the rim of the chute, his black claws biting into the stonework. A distance of over fifty feet remained between them and the shore.

"I've got you." Garwin pulled Oskar up to him with ease. "Take hold of me."

Oskar buried his grip into Garwin's mane and wrapped his arms around his shoulders. Garwin pushed off the rim and swung to the wall. His claws pierced the castle as if it were made of wood. He climbed down and landed safely on the rocky shore.

The two hurried along the coastline to a short stretch of beach. The pounding rain no longer contained Lorelei's form-altering magic. Oskar paused to catch his breath.

Garwin's tall ears tilted, listening. "Do you hear that?"

"No. What is it?"

"A woman is crying." His ears moved in the direction of the sound. "This way."

A few hundred feet away, alone and kneeling in the sand, they found Princess Joanell. She stood up, only to collapse in Garwin's arms, sobbing into his chest.

"My Princess," Garwin said, "what are you doing out here? What's happened?"

Joanell pulled away and said softly, her head down in defeat, "My father is dead. The witch killed him."

Oskar panned the area. "Where's Alek?"

Joanell caught a rolling tear with the edge of her palm. "The witch threw me from the top of the keep; Alek leapt after me." She paused to hold back her sadness. "He broke our fall and saved my life. He held me . . . held me while the water tossed us about. He didn't let me go until he knew I was all right. I tried to stay with him, but the storm . . . it tore us apart and pulled him away."

Oskar sat in the sand and held his head in his hands. His heart ached as his memory rolled through the years as Alek grew to manhood. Borlan's sons were special, their talent visible from early on. The renowned Calmoren warrior entrusted the schooling of his boys to Oskar as soon as they were old enough to open books. He remembered young Alek, always free spirited and full of adventure, happy only when running up the hills in games of swordplay, tumbling through the farms stealing fresh tomatoes, or splashing along the brook with a fishing spear while the other children carried hooks and line. Oskar taught him the fundamental academics until studies advanced to the ways of magic.

It was at this crossroad of learning, that Oskar realized the boy's nature was better suited in martial disciplines, and here that Darren became his devoted pupil. Though Alek went on to learn and train with the weapon masters, he came to Oskar's school every day to meet his younger brother and hear Oskar's stories of the gods and mythological creatures. As a grandfather figure in many ways, he was honored to have their love and admiration because he had no children of his own. What did he have now? One of the sons who used everything he'd taught him for the wrong reasons. *I am not responsible*, he thought. *Or am I?*

Joanell whispered, "I'm sorry, Oskar."

"Don't apologize, my lady. We've both suffered great losses. Your heart aches as much as mine."

The howling of the storm hounds ravaging the castle echoed in the distance—a reminder of the surrounding horror.

Garwin took off his cloak and wrapped it around Joanell. "We have to save ourselves. I fear there is no safe place on the land."

Oskar added, "You're implying we take to the sea?"

"Yes. I have the authority to command any ship. Let's make for the piers."



Garwin took charge of a small, single-masted vessel owned and manned by a trading company. Within minutes, their ship bobbed over the cresting waves.

The helmsman asked Garwin, "What is our course, Captain?"

"East."

The expanse of Torea City, with its bright torches and inviting fire light, faded from view, lost in a blanket of dense ocean fog. The monstrous calls of Lorelei's beasts chased them like faint and formless ghosts as they sailed through the night.



The sun lifted from the eastern horizon, bringing with it a sense of clarity and soothing warmth. Oskar woke in his swaying hammock in the ship's hold. Barrels and crates lined the room. Garwin sat beside him in a chair. He rubbed his eyes. Oskar wondered if the knight had slept at all.

Joanell groaned as she climbed out of the hammock across from Oskar. As she rolled her shoulders and neck, it reminded Oskar of his own soreness.

Garwin reached for a steaming decanter and a set of mugs resting on a nearby crate. He poured the two some hot tea. "Drink this. The blend will nourish you."

Oskar sniffed the wisps of steam. The aroma slightly lifted his spirit. "Smells delightful. What's in it?"

"Two parts rose hips, four parts nettles, two parts alfalfa, four parts oat straw, two parts lemon balm and one part spearmint leaf."

Oskar sipped it and nodded in approval. "I'll have to write that down."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, each lost in their own thoughts. The quiet minutes over Garwin's tea held them together in a moment of solace. Oskar stared into his cup and wondered if there was more he might have done in the castle. Garwin rubbed at the corners of his tired eyes, and Oskar imagined his happiness if he could return the knight to his old self. He wished he knew how to reverse the witch's magic. Oskar's thoughts trailed to Alek. He pictured his body drifting somewhere far on the sea. Tears came to his old eyes and rolled down his wrinkled face. "I don't know what I'll do without him." He wiped his face. "I don't know what we'll do."

Joanell wrapped her arm over his shoulder.

Garwin replied, "We'll continue this voyage far to the east, to the Barrens. We'll search for the sword as Alek wanted."

"Yes," replied Oskar. "He believed in the lost city of Everheart and the Everblade. I believe too."

"I owe it to Alek to do all I can," Joanell added.

Garwin bowed to the princess, then began to leave the room. Oskar called to him, "Wait a moment, good knight. I want to say thank you for all you've done for us. Alek admired you and I know he'd want me to express his gratitude as well."

"I appreciate that. I learned a great deal from Alek. He said we were 'bound by honor, bonded in battle—brothers.'"

Oskar nodded with a half-smile. "The code of the Calmoren warrior."

"I owe it to my brother to continue his quest. If the Everblade is out there, we'll find it. Rest now; I'll be above if you need anything." Garwin left the room.

Joanell asked Oskar. "What's an Everblade?"

"Your father did not share our story with you?"

"I'm sure he meant to."

The professor in Oskar pushed aside his sadness. "Well, there's no better place than a sailing ship to share a tale." He pulled a small leather book from his satchel and thumbed through the pages.

"It begins with a poem called The Legend of Torea . . ."



The winds remained strong and carried their ship a great distance, beyond the Fishing Isles and around the pulling current of Greatfalls cove. The voyage over the Silver Sea was uneventful, until the night. Garwin, Oskar, and Joanell stood at the port bow. Oskar peered through the telescope. "It's worse than I imagined."

A perpetual orange glow illuminated the coastline. The city of Greatfalls, perched atop the bluffs of Torea's largest waterfall, blazed with fire while the communities along the base of the falls smoldered like dying embers. Columns of black smoke branched across the night sky, while screams and howls echoed over the water.

Oskar showed Joanell the view. She shook her head. "It's all coming true. The Legend of Torea is really happening."

Oskar tried to reassure her. "Only because someone is making it so. Not because it's meant to be."

"I can't help but wonder if we're too late. The fire, the screaming, those monstrous sounds—the people are dying out there. What will be left in the morning?"

Garwin remained silent.

"My lady, do not let despair make ill your spirit," Oskar said. "The future of Torea Kingdom will rest upon your shoulders soon enough. Though the blood of kings flows in your veins, it is not a princess that we need now, but a warrior. Can you be that for us?"

"I don't know. It feels like something has broken inside of me."

"Your confidence. Tell me, where is your sword? The one your father gave you."

She looked down. "Like a careless child, I dropped it when I charged the witch."

Garwin added, "Well then . . . perhaps this might rekindle the flame of the warrior." He parted his cloak and produced a tarnished steel blade. He handed it to the princess.

"It was Alek's. He got it in Oremann. He and this weapon slayed many of Lorelei's storm hounds in Silt. And it was this sword that ended the terrible serpent of Crownwater. The people of Crownwater gave Alek a new sword to honor him. He never knew I took this back from the armory where he donated it."



Joanell examined the sword's edges. Small chips and dings gave it character and traces of dried blood remained in the joining of the hilt. She traced her thumb along the crossguard and over the etched crest of Oremann. "Why did you keep it?"

"Alek wielded a sword with such intensity, such confidence. I guess I wanted that. But now I see it will better serve you. Keep it. Let it teach you, as Alek taught me, that the strongest part of the sword is the hand that wields it."

Joanell held the sword before her. The night's clouds parted, and the moonlight glinted off the blade. "Thank you, Garwin," she said.



The winds tapered off by early morning. The group met on the main deck; Oskar stared at the dreary landscape. The coastal terrain changed from green to gray. Trees and plants grew sparse as the seaside morphed to spiny cairns of boulders and sloping ledges of mossy stone. The ship drifted quietly over the calm water, slicing through a thick veil of fog.

"We've entered the Bay of the Barrens, a place as somber as the land beyond," Garwin said.

"Yes," Joanell agreed. "They say it's haunted. That forlorn spirits keep the water still so the dead may rest."

"Who is believed to have died here?" Oskar asked.

"There are many who chose to live without the banner of Torea. So they must dwell beyond the kingdom's reach. Unfortunately, their days end in places like this."

Garwin chuckled. "A kind way to say, this is the grave of thieves and vagrants."

Ghostly islands dotted the bay, cutting the fog like giant turtle shells. Some bore the skeletons of dead trees, while others wore mournful willows, whose boughs hung as if fraught with despair.

As their ship drifted closer to the land, Oskar heard a low, almost hollow, resonance of magic sounding from the Barrens. Though distant, the echo remained strong and steady; indicators of an old and potent power. As he listened to the magic's call, feelings of loneliness, pain and grief washed over his heart and the urge to turn back nearly overcame him.

*We are not welcome here.*

The water became too shallow for the ship to advance. Garwin ordered the anchor dropped. After packing a sack of provisions for their journey, he dismissed the ship and its crew of traders. The three rowed a small boat to the shore.

The stony beach crunched as they landed. Once ashore, they gathered their gear, hiked a short distance from the beach and

ascended a rock ledge. From there, they paused to take in the surroundings.

The Barrens stretched in all directions; Oskar thought this place could be another realm by itself with its gravel dunes and ancient boulders standing throughout the land like ominous sentries. No forests, no water, no birds in the sky or tracks on the ground. Silence throughout, made stark by the hush of an endless wind and the tumble of shifting sand and stone—the landscape was a corpse, a plain of gray emptiness. Still, he struggled to cope with the dark song of the old magic emanating from the land. Despair and sorrow tugged at his very soul. It was hard to comprehend that their only hope for a triumph over evil, rested somewhere in such a sad land.

Garwin sniffed the air and lifted his ears. “There is no one out here. Our presence is unknown,” he said. “Let’s get moving.”

## Chapter 14

↓  
said, wake up!"

A boot struck Alek's ribs. He groaned, rolled onto his back, and coughed up seawater. His body throbbed in pain. He opened his eyes to see a dark haired, sunburned man looming over him. The man folded his tree-trunk arms across his chest and asked, "What's your name, dog?"

"I . . ." He coughed again and licked his dry, cracked lips. "I'm Alek."

Alek's head spun. A lingering soreness emanated from his wrists. He found chained manacles joining his arms and legs. He was aboard a ship with others chained like him.

The man knelt next to him. "Alek, huh? Well, you can forget you ever had a name. You're on my ship now, and you'll do as I say. Stand up."

Alek struggled to his feet. "Who are you? What's happened?"

"You'll figure it out soon enough, dog."

Alek glared at him. "Release me, or I'll tear your head off!"

The man laughed then punched Alek in the face. Alek took the blow, showing little affect other than a thin ribbon of blood from his nose. The man said, "Things can go two ways from here. You can do as you're told, or I can throw you back into the sea, shackles and all. Understand, dog?"

Alek clenched his jaw to suppress his anger, and then nodded. The man grinned; his remaining teeth were as brown as the ship's deck. "Get to the galley. You have five minutes to eat. You're no good to me if you're starving to death."

With tired arms and aching legs, Alek made his way to the galley. His chains rattled, heavy around his ankles. He panned the surrounding ocean but found no landmarks. As he made his way across the ship, the other captives stared at him. Alek found a wealth of emotions in their eyes. Curiosity. Hope. Fear. Apathy.

The slave working the galley handed him a bowl of cold stew with a stale wedge of bread floating in it. "I'm glad you woke up," he whispered. Bruises and lashings covered the man's frail body.

"I am Alek. What's your name?"

“Keep your voice down!” The slave’s fear was nearly tangible.

Alek whispered, “I apologize.”

“My name is Tuck.”

“Well met, Tuck. Tell me, where have I found myself?”

“This is a slave ship. You’re property of Master Urgoth.”

“I am nobody’s property.” Alek tugged the chains but winced.

“You’re hurt?”

“Yes. Though, I am lucky to be alive.”

“Indeed. We all thought you were dead, but you groaned when Master Urgoth pulled your sword from its scabbard. That’s when he shackled you.”

Alek felt the empty scabbard resting on his back. He ground his teeth in frustration. Being separated from his weapon was almost worse than being separated from his friends.

“Where is he keeping my sword? Is there a weapons hold onboard?”

“The only weapons aboard are the ones carried by Urgoth. He fancied your sword though. If I had to guess, I’d say it’s in his private quarters, under the sterncastle.”

Alek drew in a long, deep breath to cool his anger. “I see. Tell me, where are we sailing?”

“To Rebel’s Rim, of course. Urgoth will sell off most of the slaves above; probably keep you though, you look very strong.”

“Rebel’s Rim?”

“A port town on the south point of a crescent shaped island. It’s a bad place, where only cutthroats, slavers, smugglers and thieves are content.”

“Where is it in relation to Torea City?”

“Far to the east. Beyond the Barrens.”

Hearing Tuck speak of the Barrens sharpened Alek’s memory. The details of his quest came flooding back. Oskar, Garwin . . . Joanell. “Have we sailed beyond the Barrens?”

“Not yet.”

“Good.” Alek drank his stew and devoured the bread. He handed the empty bowl to Tuck. “More stew.”

“I can’t give you more.”

“If you’d like me to do something about Urgoth, you will.”

Tuck smiled and filled Alek’s bowl three more times.



The night brought a bitter cold to the Barrens. Oskar could see his breath puffing from his nose. It reminded him of the deep winter he’d left in Calmoren.

The group made a camp within a shallow cave. With little resistance across the land, the wind blew fierce, howling outside the

mouth of their crude shelter. Oskar used his magic to create a fire to combat the chill.

Joanell rubbed at her shoulders. "I never knew it could get so cold out here."

Garwin agreed. "Another reason why no one lives in the Barrens."

"I wonder what has become of the city, of the castle."

"We can see if you'd like, Princess. I can bring forth a window in this fire that will show us the state of Torea City," Oskar said. "Though, I caution you. It might not be as you hope."

"What might your magic show me?"

"It will show you whatever your heart desires, as the spell's properties will be bound to your emotions."

Joanell traced the grip of Alek's sword. "Go ahead, Oskar."

He worked his magic into the campfire until a glowing window, bright with the light of the flames, appeared. There came the image of Castle Torea, standing in near ruin. Four of the six towers burned, flames rippling over them like orange banners, while two stood like charred trees. The keep looked hollow with its blown windows staring dark, like eyeless sockets. Black columns of smoke rose from the many buildings and homes surrounding the castle.

Oskar watched the fire, heartbroken. Instead of knights fighting the fires and battling the enemy, he saw only storm hounds prowling the streets. Bodies lay in contorted heaps, blood tracing the lines in the stone roads. The vision panned back to the castle, to Joanell father's room. There, the body of the king remained on the terrace without a crown.

"I've seen enough." She closed her eyes and turned away.

Garwin gave his blue cloak to Joanell, who wrapped it around her body. "We should try to sleep," he insisted. "We'll continue our trek early in the morning."

"What should we be looking for?" Joanell asked.

"Signs of an ancient civilization. Depressions in the ground where foundations once rested, or rock pilings that might have been walls," Oskar answered.

The group laid their heads on the sandy ground and closed their eyes. One by one, sleep took them.



Sometime late into the night, Oskar awoke. His fire had gone out but the interior of the cave flashed red and blue. He woke the others.

"What's causing this?" asked Joanell. They gathered outside the cave staring up at the sky. Vapor-like ribbons of red and blue light danced across the firmament, streaming out of a crimson aurora far on the horizon.

Oskar held up his hands and inhaled the air. As he listened to identify the magic, a brilliant banner of red energy coursed from the sky and struck him in the chest. He yelled in agony and fell to his hands and knees.

Joanell rushed to his side. "Is it the witch's magic?"

"No. It's Darren's." Oskar felt weak, starved for strength and energy. He took a moment to collect himself. With a groan and help from Joanell, he stood up. "This is the light of the Gateway of Realms. Those rays of energy are like tentacles seeking and draining power from this world."

Garwin added, "We've been seeing this strange light for quite some time, always hanging over the eastern horizon."

"Alek saw it the night we arrived in Torea. But it faded. It's clear that Darren's power has grown a great deal. I imagine the Gateway of Realms is no longer the crude conduit he used to cast us here, but a complete inter-dimensional channel. To light up the night like this is a sign of matured power." Oskar marveled at the storm of light in the sky. The sound of the magic's force was not merely a rhythm or pulse; it was like an orchestra of power that rumbled in his chest and echoed deep in his ears.

Garwin asked, "Is your command of magic enough to stop Darren?"

"I don't know." Self-doubt weighed in the pit of his stomach like a cold stone.

"Assuming it is, can you maintain the gateway so that you and Alek can find your way home?"

"Once more, I don't know. One thing is certain, however. The light will lead us to our enemies."

"Perhaps that's what they want," Garwin said.

"What choice do we have?" Oskar remembered the initial power of the gateway when Darren opened it the first time. That he could command it then was a feat; to think of it now, the power, the control, the strength of that magic . . . the worry continued to effervesce in his stomach.



Alek's vision cleared and he felt the strength returning to his limbs. Still, his ribs ached and he knew that it would take another day or two before he would be strong enough to contend with Urgoth.

The slave master made his rounds, whipping those who slowed their work, kicking the tired, and beating the ill. He enjoyed his work, this much was clear. Alek focused on whatever Urgoth tasked him with, if only to avoid petty injuries that would hinder his recovery. All day long, Alek played the part of obedient slave, but in the night, he rallied his force.

While Urgoth slept in his locked chamber within the sterncastle, Alek grouped the slaves at the front bow's forecastle.

One slave challenged him. "You claim the king has been killed, how can you prove that you speak truth and not treason?"

"Only time can prove my honesty."

Another slave asked, "Why should we trust you? How do we know you won't claim this ship as your own and sell us at Rebel's Rim?"

"This is not about trust, men," Alek asserted. "This is about forming an alliance." He paused and eyed the group of slaves. They stood in manacles, sullied, disheartened and weak. "You are all ruined men. Defeated. If you vow to help me sail this ship and reach my destination, I will fight for you and you will be free again. I seek not your devotion, only your help. Raise your fist to show your allegiance."

The group shuffled about in apprehension, muttering their doubts. Tuck came forward and stood beside Alek.

"I believe in Alek because I believe in the gods. Maybe he is a blessing from Lady Norea as a sign that we are meant to live into better days. As it stands, we're on a course for Rebel's Rim. We will be sold off to men worse than Urgoth. What do you have to lose now?" He raised a fist high over his head.

A collective silence hung over the ship. Each man deliberated, considering his own needs and desires as well as weighing the chances for success. After a few long minutes, fists began to rise. Soon, each man raised his fist in the air—ready to follow Alek.



The next day, as the sun peaked over the masts, Alek quietly met with Tuck in the galley. "Are you sure you're willing to go through with this?"

Tuck nervously stirred a pot of boiling stew. "I trust you, Alek. But it doesn't make it any easier. Is there no other way?"

"Though the other men are with us, they lack courage. Unfortunately, it's up to you and me."

Urgoth could be heard above, whipping and cursing at the rest. Alek listened to Urgoth's steps and, when he was sure that the slave master stood near the galley hatch, he signaled to Tuck, who then shoved over a shelf of heavy pots.

Urgoth shouted down the hatch, "What's going on down there, slave?"

Tuck's hands trembled but he replied, "Nothing that should concern you. Leave me alone."

Alek nodded to Tuck, reassuring him. He whispered, "Perfect."

Urgoth's shouted a trail of obscenities as he hurried down the

hatch, into the galley. Alek slipped behind some barrels and peeked around the side as his plan unfolded. Urgoth stormed across the room and grabbed hold of Tuck by his shirt collar. "No one gets mouthy with me, slave. You got some kind of problem that needs fixing?"

"Well, yes in fact," squeaked Tuck. "The stew is much too hot." At that, he shoved away from Urgoth and splashed a ladleful of boiling stew into his eyes. Urgoth hollered out in agony and feverishly wiped at his burning eyes. Tuck darted by him, racing for the hatch to the upper deck. "Alek," he shouted above, "I need your help!"

Urgoth unraveled his whip and chased after him. "Go ahead and run! I'd like to see that dog save you."





Hail the Queen of Torea!" Darren clapped and bowed playfully before Lorelei.

They met in the throne room. A large fire roared, drying the pools of blood on the floor. The bodies of fallen knights lay strewn about. Lorelei sat in the golden Throne of the Sun wearing the royal crown of the late Queen Foss. The gold and silver circlet sparkled with rows of icy diamonds and gleaming sapphires.

"Long have I waited for this; long have I dreamed of castle and crown." She leaned back in the throne, twirling her locks of black hair through her fingers. She eyed Darren seductively. "How do I look, my lord?" She crossed her legs and the side of her dress parted revealing the naked skin of her thigh. She trailed her hand over her knee to beckon him closer.

Darren approached and leaned into her. "Like the queen you were destined to be."

Their lips met for a deep kiss. She brushed her soft fingers along his cheek. "I couldn't have done it without you."

He gave a half smile. "Don't forget that."

Darren moved through the room. He kicked aside broken spears, shattered shields and chipped blades. He stepped over the rotting corpse of a castle attendant, holding his nose and waving away the flies. He stopped before the fireplace. "You really must do something about the décor."

"I like it this way. What's troubling you?"

Darren folded his hands behind his back, and stared into the fire. "You mustn't get too comfortable in that throne. The war for Torea is not over."

"What are you talking about?" Lorelei asked. "The kingdom lives in the grip of fear. I've killed the king and turned half the population of Torea City to hounds. Who will overthrow me? Surely not the princess; I killed her too."

"Wrong!"

Darren suddenly appeared in front of her and clasped his hand around her throat. Lorelei choked. Darren could see the confusion and fear bringing tears to her eyes. He heard her thoughts as she struggled

in his grip. *Why is he doing this?* She lit her hand with searing magic but Darren absorbed her power. She gasped, struggling to breathe.

Darren locked his eyes on hers and snarled, "Princess Joanell lives, witch. As do the others. They seek the Everblade. If they find that sword, we'll lose everything!"

He released her. She fell from the throne to the floor, coughing and gagging for air. She looked up at him, her face glowing orange in the fire light and an angry red light burning in her pupils.

Darren heard her thoughts as clearly as if she had spoken them. *I am a queen now. No one treats a queen like this. No one!* She slipped her hand to her waist and pulled a long dagger.

Darren closed in on her, dropping his boot against her blade, pinning the weapon to the floor. He crouched next to her and asked calmly, "You think so loudly, my dear, and I don't like what I'm hearing. You mean to overthrow me? Tell me why I shouldn't kill you right now?"

She rubbed her throat and replied in a raspy, trembling voice, "Because you love me."

Darren laughed, snatched her hair, and pulled her head back to force a hard kiss on her mouth. "That's exactly why. Now I must go, but I'll return and we'll continue our dark romance."

He left her then, storming out of the throne room with heavy footfalls. His steps echoed behind him.

"Where are you going?" she called.

"To the Barrens."



With Urgoth pursuing Tuck, Alek left the galley and snuck across the ship. He entered the slave master's private quarters. Resting on a short table was his Crownwater sword. He snatched it up, then waited, listening to the commotion outside.

Urgoth chased Tuck on the main deck. He whipped him several times; Tuck staggered from the lashings but moved across the ship and up to the sterncastle, the deck just above Urgoth's quarters. He taunted the slave master along. "You can't treat us this way! I'm not scared of you or your whip. None of us are."

Urgoth followed Tuck atop the sterncastle, where he cornered him. He struck the poor man several times. Alek waited under them, watching the struggle through spaces between the floorboards. Tuck endured a string of brutal lashes but held to his faith in Alek's plan. Alek heard the terrible whip crack over Tuck's body, sounding like a tree branch splintering in a storm. Tuck groaned and fell to the deck. Alek followed Urgoth's footfalls with a ready blade.

"Get up, slave," shouted Urgoth.

Tuck answered wearily, "No. It's time for you to fall." He reached forward and hooked Urgoth's legs, scooping them out from under him and shoving him backward. Urgoth landed hard on his back and in that moment, Alek thrust the shining tip of his sword through the floorboards, piercing the center of Urgoth's torso.

Urgoth choked and gurgled as he stared down at the blade protruding from his chest. Alek withdrew the sword and joined Tuck above, as Urgoth labored his final breaths.



The wheeling of sun and moon counted the passing of two days. The group hiked over dunes of gray sand, across windswept, ashy plains and through skeletal forests of swaying snags. The land remained dry and colorless during the day, but at night, the arcane aurora over the horizon illuminated the Barrens with an unsettling, bloody glow.

By midday, Garwin noticed the mage frequently stopping to feel the ground, pausing to listen to the monotonous wind or muttering incantations during moments of rest.

The group sat at the bank of a dried riverbed and ate scraps of smoked meat and pickled eggs. The pace of the wind increased, stirring up squalls of ashy sand. They shielded their eyes until the sand storms subsided.

Garwin asked Oskar, "You've seemed disturbed for some time now. Is there something we need to know?"

"Nothing escapes you, Captain Garwin." Oskar gave a half smile. "It's this place. It radiates with magic. I feel it in everything—the rocks, the standing dead trees, even this dried river. It's an old power, weak yet still capable, like the handshake of an elderly man. Imagine walking through a cemetery and hearing the memories of the dead whispering through the ground. That's what I feel out here."

By early evening, the ground beneath their feet had become shards of slate but soon transitioned to an expanse of solid rock stretching in all directions. Colossal boulders presided over the land, like hunkering giants frozen in time. As the sun tipped to the west, shadows stretched toward the blackening east, creating a grim contrast to an otherwise fallow land. As the sandy wind gusted between the boulders, a distant, familiar voice called out, "Can you hear me?"

Oskar gasped, "Praise the gods, it's Alek!"

Alek's voice called again, "Is anyone out here?"

Oskar yelled back, "Alek, we hear you. We're coming."

They followed his voice, hurrying between the boulders as the night moved over them. "I'm here," Alek called. "Hurry, I need your help!"

Garwin's sharp ears detected a strange and reverberating echo trailing the voice. He stopped and snatched Oskar's robes, pulling him back. He put up a hand to stop Joanell. Oskar asked, "What's the problem? Alek's out here somewhere and needs our help."

"That's the problem."

Oskar looked confused.

"A warrior of Alek's quality would not wander in the home of the enemy, shout out that he needed help and announce his vulnerability. Be quiet and still for a moment."

Garwin paused to sniff the air. His ears searched for the smallest sounds. From behind a nearby boulder, he heard breathing. Garwin sniffed the air again and caught the scent of spiced incense and decaying flesh—not at all the rustic, windblown scent of Alek. He approached the large stone cautiously. "Alek?"

"No." Darren emerged. "But close enough."

Garwin roared and opened his claws. Joanell drew her Oremann sword. Oskar lit his palms with a hot, white energy.

Darren stepped toward the group with his hands folded in front of him. He locked eyes with Oskar. "Greetings, Professor. It's been a while. Have you enjoyed your stay in Torea?"

“The damage you’ve caused to this world, to these people, is unthinkable!” Oskar declared.

“Silence!” Darren flashed his left hand at Oskar, catching him in a magical grip, then hurled him against an opposing boulder.

Oskar groaned when his body slammed against the rock.

Darren’s eyes burned bright red while his spell held Oskar firmly in place. He turned to the princess. “Where is my brother?”

She did not answer.

Garwin studied the sorcerer. Darren wore a heavy black cloak lined in green silk. Deep purple jewels were sewn into the hem and around the gold clasps. As the steady wind parted his cloak, he saw his dark purple doublet, quilted black pants, and tall black boots. The jeweled sword attached to his hip caught Garwin’s eye. He thought, *why would a powerful sorcerer be armed?* It seemed ironic at first, but Garwin reasoned that a mage would only carry a weapon if he knew his magic could fail.

“You’ll answer me,” warned Darren. He started for her—Garwin pounced with the fury of a lion, tackling Darren to the ground. The impact broke the spell on Oskar and he hurried to Joannell. Garwin slashed his claws at Darren, finding only the cloak.

Darren appeared high atop a looming boulder. He laughed. “That tavern trick always works.”

Garwin growled and threw down the torn cloak.

Darren said, “I came to tell you that it’s over. Torea belongs to Lorelei. Now it is here, in this wasteland,” he opened his arms as if to show off the Barrens, “that you will die.”

“Three against one is not favorable odds,” Garwin challenged.

Darren threw back his head, fanned his arms, and wrapped his body in red energy. He became translucent and melted within the stone. The ground trembled as the massive boulder started to crack.

Garwin hollered, “Run!”

Darren’s boulder broke open, sending fragments of stone high into the air. A gigantic golem emerged, with a body forged of smooth granite and veined with white quartz.

Garwin carried Joannell on his back and ran as fast as he could, lunging with his legs and driving forward with his clawed hands. Oskar raised the wind and flew several feet off the ground, holding tight to his satchel. He shot at it with javelins of lightning, slowing its pursuit. It pressed on, driving its enormous fists like hammers into the ground. The attacks rumbled the Barrens, blowing up clouds of dirt and dust.

Joannell clung tightly to Garwin and looked back to see that Darren’s monster had stopped chasing them. “It stopped,” she cried out. Garwin and Oskar halted. Garwin panted and Oskar dropped to the ground

and fell to one knee.

“It’s readying a different attack,” Garwin added.

The golem crouched down, its stone knees grinding as it bent. Then, with tremendous force, the giant leapt high into the air, dropping down with all its might and girth. The force of its fall broke the ground, splitting the stone floor of the Barrens. The terrain quaked as a fissure opened and streaked toward them. Oskar, Joanell and Garwin staggered as the land under their feet shifted, cracked and opened. They started to fall but Oskar caught them with his magic, levitating the group while a dark chasm swallowed the world beneath them. The golem reached for the group as they hovered but could not grab them without risking a fall.

Oskar shouted to Garwin and Joanell, “Be calm. I am going to float us to the opposite ledge.” He turned to assess the distance and failed to see the Golem’s attack.

Garwin roared, “Oskar! Watch out!”

A volley of stones rushed past them, one striking Oskar’s head. His eyes rolled up as he lost consciousness. The spell broke and they fell. Darren’s laughter echoed in Garwin’s ears.

## Chapter 16

**T**uck pointed to the coastline, barely visible through the morning fog. “That’s the Bay of the Barrens. This is as far as we’ll go, Alek. Are you sure you must depart?”

“I’m sure. I wish you all well and may your gods guide you home.”

Alek secured his sword to his back, slung a sack of food and a skin of water over his shoulder, and then lowered a rowboat to the sea. He bid farewell to the men and climbed down to the boat. The fog hid the water’s surface, wrapping around him as he rowed between the small islands and toward land.

Once ashore, he found the abandoned rowboat used by the others and examined the sand around it. Faint footprints remained a few yards ahead, leading north. Alek reasoned that the impressions belonged to Garwin. The man-beast outweighed the others, ensuring a deeper print.

He pressed on, pausing frequently to keep the trail. As the wind coursed over the landscape, the trail became harder to hold. Alek remembered back to his childhood and wished he’d taken his tracking lessons more seriously. By the later part of the afternoon, the trail faded and disappeared.

Come nightfall, Darren’s crimson aurora burned in the eastern sky. Alek sat atop a stone ledge looking out over the Barrens sharpening his sword.

*Your power has grown, brother. The blade rang as he dragged the whetstone down the edge. So has mine. I’ll find the Everblade then I’ll find you.*

Alek remained on the ledge for most of the night. As the magic blazed overhead, he wondered where and how the others might be. Sleep was not an option for him, not while Oskar and Garwin endured somewhere out there. He descended the ledge and continued toward the origin of aurora.

As the light of dawn broke over the horizon, the aurora faded. Alek’s pace slowed. He had come to the edge of vast stretch of rocky plains where the wind howled, never subsiding. He paused when he heard a whisper, a tiny voice speaking. “Hear me, warrior.”

Alek gazed over the desolate terrain, searching for the source of the

voice. He drew his sword and called out, "I hear you. Who are you?"

The wind continued, blowing up squalls of sand. The faint voice replied, "My name is Bram."

"Show yourself."

"I am at your feet."

A step away from Alek's boot, peeking out of the sand, rested half the face of a sun-bleached human skull. Alek stepped back, angling the tip of his blade at the skull. "I've suffered enough foul magic in this land. I will not endure further madness."

"I mean you no harm. I wish to help you." The voice sounded in Alek's mind, a whisper heard within. "I, too, have suffered."

A thin, white vapor streamed up from the eye-socket and clouded over the skull. Alek watched the cloud take the shape of a man. Soon, the translucent image of a farmer, wearing a patched, belted tunic and sandals, appeared before him. "You must be Alek?"

"That's correct. How did you know?"

"Your friends passed through here not long ago. I heard your name and saw your image in their thoughts."

Alek filled with hope. "Are they all right?"

"They were when they passed. Though, now, I do not know."

Alek studied the farmer made of mist. "You say your name is Bram. Well, Bram, what manner of man are you?"

"I am a spirit unable to rest, a ghost."

"How is this possible?" A part of him was thrilled to be speaking with a ghost, but he didn't let on. There was still cause for apprehension.

"It is this place, the Barrens, as you call it. One's soul cannot find rest in a land that mourns. The souls of those who died here are not at peace."

Alek secured his blade. "You must have lived in the time of Everheart."

"Yes. The war against the dark sorceress, Lorelei, claimed many lives, including my own."

"What of the Everblade?"

"Ah, yes. It protected us but it could not stop the rain. Lorelei brewed a poison and filled the clouds. A terrible sickness fell over the land. We tried to outrun it, outlast it. But you can't escape pestilence. Our livestock died, our crops rotted, even our water became tainted. Death. So much death."

"Can you take me to the Everblade?"

"No. Unfortunately, I do not know where it is."

"What about Everheart? Can you lead me to its ruins?"

"Yes. Though I must warn you, once more, of the lingering pain over this land."



Alek tightened the strap of his baldric. "Go on."

"There are many here like me. Though, most are not as amicable. They are angry, fearful of further torment, and capable of retaliation."

Alek looked though Bram's incorporeal form. How much harm could a spirit possibly inflict if made of mist? "Say no more of it. I fear no man, living or dead."

Bram sighed. "Very well, warrior."

Alek panned the area. "Tell me, do you know—"

"—what happened to your friends? They fell into a crevasse."

"What?"

"The sorcerer commanding Lorelei created a monster of stone, a golem, which split the ground under their feet. They fell." Bram bowed his head. "I no longer hear their thoughts."

"Why didn't you help them, as you're helping me?"

"Because at the time, I did not know if they were friend or foe. Now, I wish I had spoken to them."

"Can you guide me to where this happened? I must find them."

"Yes. Take my skull. Carry it with you. Speak to me and I will respond."

Bram's form vaporized and trailed away in the wind. Alek knelt to pull the skull from the sand but paused. "Tell me, ghost. Why are you so willing to help me? Do you seek vengeance?"

Bram's voice echoed in Alek's mind, saying, "A vengeful spirit can never rest. I have accepted what has happened, but the everlasting sorrow of my people keeps me from moving on. My only desire is peace for the souls of Everheart. By helping you, I am helping them."

"How can I be sure that some damnable curse will not befall me for accepting you as a companion?"

"What could be worse than what you've already endured? How else will you find your way?"

Alek took up the skull and tied it to his belt. The wind rushed over him. He shielded his eyes and set off into the plains. After some time, he touched the skull. "Can you hear me, Bram?"

"Yes. I'm with you. Keep northward."

Bram's skull bounced against his hip as he trekked over the stony land. His sword chimed against his back as the wind pulled at his cloak. Having found a guide, Alek felt at last that his luck had turned.



The icy water of an underground river saved their lives but Garwin struggled to tread water. Panic tugged at his heart as the water filled his mouth. Joanell grabbed hold of his arm and helped him to the stone bank. He coughed and shook the water from his mane. The princess then retrieved Oskar, who remained unconscious.

They grouped on the gravel embankment and Joanell assessed the old mage's condition. Blood ran from a wound on the back of his head. Joanell spoke tenderly to him, "Oskar? Can you hear me?"

The mage stirred and his eyelids parted. He groaned and asked, "What happened?"

"It was the golem. He hit your head with a rock. Are you all right?"

Oskar took a few weary breaths. "I need time to rest, to recover my strength. I'll be fine." He closed his eyes and fell asleep.

Garwin scavenged the area. To his surprise, he found lengths of dried roots; perfect for a fire. He struggled in the dampness of the chasm but eventually built a roaring fire. They moved Oskar close to the warmth, then sat near the crackling flames to clear their heads and recover.

Garwin tracked the passing of time by tracking the sky through the mouth of the fissure. The night rolled over them. The stars and moon appeared even farther away from his vantage point far below the ground. Though cold shadows and disconcerting sounds surrounded him, he fell asleep by the comfort of the fire.



As the faint glow of morning shone down the crevasse, Oskar woke. "My satchel."

Garwin handed it to him. Oskar opened the bag and withdrew a pouch of herbs. He placed a pinch of dried leaves under his tongue. After a few minutes, he sat up and rubbed his eyes. "I feel better now."

"I'm glad you're well, Oskar," Joanell said. "That's an interesting remedy."

Oskar nodded and, with shaky legs, stood up, apparently eager to talk about his herbs. Sure enough, Oskar went on like the professor he was, "It comes from my homeland. The early leaves of the Brazelbrock Bramble are potent and have a slight peppery, mint taste; not a bad way to spice up a brew of tea in fact. The brambles grow in shaded groves. One only needs a pinch to banish minor pains."

"Do you have more?"

"I have enough to last us a while."

Garwin added, "Let's hope we don't need it."

Joanell surveyed the area. The jagged stonewalls stretched to a dizzying height. Shadows painted the area and traces of glittering mica reflected the dim light from the sky far above. The subterranean river looked black, stained with the perpetual darkness that only exists underground.

Garwin slung the traveling pack over his shoulder, "Let's get moving. We'll continue along this bank as far upriver as we can. Stay

together.”

Oskar lit his hands with glowing magic, casting a path of light before them. The walls arched overhead as they ventured deeper into the unknown. Joanell shivered from the brisk chill that trailed the riverbank. The musky scent of the timeless stones and the constant choir of echoing drips and drops affirmed that she was far away from the bright glory of her kingdom.

The journey through the hollow of the Barrens challenged Joanell's senses. The ground sloped and curved, causing all of them to fight for balance. The rushing of water and wind echoed from all directions, creating whispers of unknown origin. At times, the height of the stone ceiling dropped to mere inches above their heads, only to lift away suddenly, revealing domed chambers where limestone stalactites and stalagmites formed a crystalline forest. Joanell marveled at the beautiful columns shimmering white, pink, orange and green under Oskar's magical light. A splash from somewhere in the river startled her. She drew her blade and spun toward the sound. “Did you hear that?”

They nodded. Oskar aimed his glowing hand at the water and increased the magic to better light the area. They found no cause for the disturbance. Garwin reasoned, “Perhaps a stalactite fell from the ceiling. Let's keep moving.”

Their journey led them through a network of large caverns, all dense with glittering pillars of limestone. After an hour, they paused at the riverbank to rest. Oskar sat on a boulder and rubbed his shoulders. Joanell knelt by the river and splashed cool water in her face. Garwin growled. His ears angled. “We are not alone. I heard footsteps. Group up, back-to-back.”

They took formation with weapons and magic poised for defense, waiting for any movements between the shadows and stone columns.

Joanell saw it first. “There,” she pointed her sword tip. “It moved behind that pillar.”

“What did you see?” Oskar asked.

“The figure of a person. It moved out of view too quickly.”

Garwin roared, “Who's there? Show yourself.”

Only the sounds of the river, dripping condensation, and the soft moan of the subterranean wind replied.

Garwin said to Oskar, “I don't want to break our defensive posture. Throw some magic to drive out whoever is hiding back there.”

Oskar kindled a ball of crackling energy and hurled it where Joanell saw the figure. The ball streaked through the cavern, bursting beside the column, shattering it like glass. No person or creature appeared, but an icy breeze wrapped around Joanell's flesh.

Hearing no sounds and seeing nothing else after several minutes,

Joanell released her stance and rubbed her arms. "Whatever it was, it's gone."

"Let's camp here for the night." Garwin tossed his pack to the ground.

She nodded, but couldn't part the cold chill that crawled its icy fingers over her skin.



Joanell woke, unable to breathe. An invisible force gripped her throat, choking her. She gasped and writhed, trying to break free. Hearing Joanell's struggle, Oskar and Garwin awoke. They rushed to her side and she looked up at them with pleading, watery eyes.

"What's happening to her?" asked Garwin.

Joanell wheezed, trying to speak and breathe. Her lungs constricting in search of air.

Oskar held Joanell's face in his hands, encouraging her to be calm. He commanded Garwin, "Say a prayer."

"What?"

"Speak a prayer to your gods. Say it with conviction."

Garwin knelt with his hands placed on the ground before him. "Lord Brakore, father of mercy, let us hear your whispers of tranquility. Ease our pain."

The violent hold on the princess released. Joanell sat up in fearful anger. She coughed and rubbed at her aching throat as the air filled her lungs. "What . . ." she rasped, "was that?"

Garwin knelt beside her. "I don't know. Are you all right, my lady?"

"I . . . I'll be fine."

Garwin asked Oskar, "What's going on here? Can you sense any magic?"

"Wraiths," replied Oskar. "Angry souls bound to this land." He lit the area with his magic.

Garwin called out, "Who dares to harm the Princess of Torea? Show yourself, ghost." His voice echoed throughout the labyrinth of caves, bouncing off the many crystal pillars.

An unfamiliar, disembodied voice whispered ominous words. "Leave or die."

Shadows moved in the corners of Joanell's vision. Glimpses of human-shaped figures darted behind stalagmite columns. The figures melted within the darkness and passed through the walls. Joanell felt her arms tingle with nervousness. She recalled reading stories about ghosts and restless spirits in the mage's library as a child. It was fun in those days, but never could she have imagined the reality of it.

A choir of whispered threats sounded around them. Joanell heard men, women, and even children speaking out against their presence.

*Be gone. Leave now. Die.* Her heart hammered and a deep chill rolled down her spine. The voices resonated through her very bones, leaving an echo of sorrow and despair that stung her heart.

Oskar motioned for the others to follow him into a dark tunnel leading away from the river. The whispers trailed behind them, fading under the echoes of their footsteps.

## Chapter 17

Alek knelt beside the edge of the crevasse and peered into its depths. The wind howled far below. “You say they fell here?”

Bram took form at Alek’s side and peered over the edge. “Yes. This is the place.”

“I wish I knew how far this goes and what’s down there.”

Bram offered, “This is where I can be of assistance. I’ll return in a moment.”

The farmer became a cloud of mystical fog and flowed down into the blackness of the crevasse. Alek waited for several long minutes until Bram returned.

The farmer reported, “There’s a river down there, and footprints along the bank. Your friends must be alive.”

“Then we continue on.”

“But you’ve been journeying day and night. You need rest.”

“I will rest when reunited with the others.”

Bram sighed. “As you wish.”

Alek took a few steps away from the precipice. “The walls are too unstable to climb. Do you have any magic to aid my descent? Can you levitate me down or create a magic ladder, staircase, or rope of some kind?”

“I have no means of conjuration.”

“Then I guess that leaves the old fashioned way.”

Alek burst into a sprint and, with his sword held high, leapt over the edge.

The river caught him, as it had the others. Bram met him on the bank. “Are you all right?”

Alek shook the water from his hair and wrung his cloak. “Yes. That wasn’t my first fall to water.” He knelt and examined the ground. Bram’s observation held true; three distinct footprints stamped the area—the soft soles of Oskar’s shoes, the narrow-toes of Joanell’s boots and Garwin’s unmistakable clawed feet. The impressions trailed from the bank, heading upriver. Alek continued his pursuit.

The deeper he ventured, the darker the subterranean world became. It wasn’t long before Alek found himself wrapped in blackness. He knew he could go no further without light to guide him. He reached

for the skull dangling from his hip.

“Bram,” he called out, his voice echoing throughout the stone world.

Bram replied softly, “I hear you.”

“It’s too dark. Do you have any suggestions?”

“Only one. I can take form and illuminate.”

“Why do you sound apprehensive about it?”

“Because it will have a negative effect on you.”

“How so?”

“When I appear to you as an apparition, I use the residual energy in the land above to do so. The energy down here is different; it’s too distant, untouchable.”

“Then you need an alternate source of energy?”

“Yes. Your mortal energy.”

“My what?”

“If you want me to light the way, I will need to tap into your spiritual strength. The longer I connect with you, the more tired you’ll become.”

“It must be done.”

“Very well. Tell me if you need to rest.”

“Just do it. We’ve wasted enough time discussing it.”

Bram took form and passed through Alek’s body. Like a shroud of ocean mist, a wave of cold dampness enveloped him. At first, his skin tingled and started to burn, then a sharp pressure filled his head. Alek bent down, bracing himself against his knees. He groaned as the painful pressure traveled from his head to his chest and sank in his stomach. It was all he could do to keep from vomiting. Then, in a matter of seconds, the pain and sickness vanished. Alek stood upright, feeling warm and tired. Bram’s image illuminated.

Alek cast a sideways glance at the ghost. “That wasn’t pleasant.”

“You didn’t want to talk about it.”

Alek cocked an eyebrow then took in the surroundings. A cavernous room of stone columns appeared around them. Stalactites hung like dreadful teeth. He found the trail and moved on, ignoring his growing somnolence.



Oskar, Garwin, and Joanell crouched as they passed through the narrow tunnel. Garwin studied the rough walls. “This tunnel is not natural. It was made. The gouges and irregular contour indicate the labor of man.”

Joanell’s boot crunched on something brittle. They paused to see what she had stepped on. Oskar’s light revealed an old, gray bone. Joanell picked it up with care and examined it. Being a skilled

huntress, she identified what it wasn't. "This is not from an animal."

Garwin asked, "Then what?"

"It's a human rib."

Oskar had the others stand aside as he focused a strong wind at the passage floor. The wind blew away several layers of dirt and dust until a corridor of skeletons stretched before them. Joanell covered her nose and mouth with her hands as it settled. The skeletons stared at her, but she was not unnerved. Rather, grief pulled at her heart. Some of the deceased still wore remnants of clothing, while others remained in the positions of their deaths. Two skeletons sat against the wall, holding one another; several more lay curled up on the floor, as if trapped in a shivering sleep. As the group traversed the passage, the human bones told the story of the final hours far below the land above.

"These must be people from Everheart," Oskar said.

"We should say a prayer for them," Garwin said.

Joanell offered and knelt with her head bowed. "Family of Five, ever-watchful gods and goddesses, send our sentiments of love and peace to these souls, whoever they are and wherever they may be."

Oskar praised, "A lovely appeal, Princess."

"Do you think they heard me?"

As if in response, a ghostly blue glow shined on a section of the wall. Writing appeared, etched into the rock. The words held their radiance, brightening and dimming as if in cadence with the rhythm of their breath.

Joanell approached the inscription, "I can't read it. It's in writing I've never seen. Perhaps it is the ancient writing of Everheart."

Oskar approached, read the writing, and gasped.

"What is it, Oskar?" Joanell asked.

"I can read it."

"How is that so?"

"Because it's the writing of my homeland. It's Calmoren." Oskar read the words for the others.

"Beyond the lost river,  
Through the hall of the dead,  
Into the tomb  
Where the war-ravaged fled.

"This is the way  
To the land of ill times.  
In a ruined valley  
The good relic shines.

"The sword will call



From its tower concealed.  
In the warrior's eye,  
The king's wrath revealed."

Excited, Oskar said, "Give me a moment to scribe this in my journal for later reference."

Garwin growled. "I don't like riddles."

"It's not a riddle," replied Joanell. "It's a guide to Everheart." She paused and traced the words with her finger.

Oskar added, "It's so much more! If this message was left here by the people of Everheart, than this means that Torea and Calmoren are related."

Garwin added, "We've come beyond the 'lost river,' and this is surely the 'hall of the dead.' We must search for a tomb of some kind."

With careful steps, they ventured on. The passage snaked deeper underground, leading them closer to the core of a lifeless world. No longer did the skeletons lay in poses of sleep or consolation. The bone figures told that they died while crawling away. Joanell imagined them reaching forward with desperation, exhaling a final breath then lying down to die. Throughout the hall, the dead continued to express their silent fear, forever frozen as prisoners and victims.

Garwin called to her, "Princess?"

She had stopped and lagged behind, lost in her sorrow for these unfortunate people. She shook her head to clear her mind. "I'm right behind you."



As Bram drew from Alek's mortal energy to light the way, Alek labored to breathe. He stumbled, falling hard to his hands and knees.

Bram had known this would eventually happen. He floated to his side. "You must rest, Alek. I will protect you."

Too tired to speak, Alek nodded his agreement. He pulled his cloak closed and tucked his traveling bag under his head. Bram released the spiritual connection and darkness swallowed the area. Like the unyielding pull of an ocean undertow, sleep swept Alek away.

Bram remained with the sleeping warrior. Though no longer living, he couldn't help but feel uneasy far below the land. Senses and emotions remain after death and for souls who do not rest, these feelings are heightened. He pushed aside his tension and focused on guarding Alek. He had never met such a determined man and it honored him to be able to help guide him through the unknown.

For too long, Bram existed as the ghost of a forgotten man, from a forgotten land. Now, the old evil had returned and a new force arose to oppose it. But Alek was only a single piece of that force. In this,

Bram found purpose. After so many long years of walking in the places between memory and now, sleep and awake, life and death, Bram's existence meant something.

After several hours, the troubled feeling intensified and enveloped him. This time, it was too great to ignore. Bram knew then that he was no longer alone. Other spirits had come into the cavernous chamber. Bram felt their presence resonate through his residual energy, like a series of echoes passing through one another.

A whisper entered his thoughts, "Who are you?"

Bram responded in thought, "My name is Bram. I am a farmer from Everheart."

The spirits took form, four of them, lighting the area. Bram's figure emerged as well, without his doing. He wondered how they could do this but as their images sharpened, he noticed their garb. Mages. Each wore long robes and tabards bearing Everheart's noble crest—a blazing sun with a radiant sword standing upward before it. The spirit mages carried intricately carved staves and pointed them at Bram.

"Do you know who we are?" They spoke aloud in unison.

"You are the Elder Mages of Everheart."

They lowered their staves. One came forward and looked down at Alek, who remained lost in sleep. "Why do you help this man trespass in our sacred vaults?"

"I did not know these caverns were sacred, and he is a friend. He seeks his companions. They've wandered this way."

"But there is a greater purpose. We sense it. What is the reason for your journey?"

"We seek the means to destroy Lorelei and the sorcerer fueling her power."

"Then you seek the Everblade."

"Yes."

"It is forbidden."

Bram was about to challenge the Elder Mage, but Alek woke and said, "I don't care if it's forbidden or not. I will obtain the sword and avenge this kingdom."

"You speak boldly, warrior. Your purpose here is our only interest; you need not express your intentions, for we will not be the ones responsible for passing judgment on your quality."

"Who, then?"

"Not who. But what. The Everblade will decide if you should live or die. It will take your life if it desires."

Alek pushed his blade through the mage's apparition. Mist billowed out around the edges. "You're lucky to lack flesh and bone. Still, your threats and curses will not slow me."

"Nor have they slowed your allies."

Alek pulled back his blade. "Where are they?"

"Not far from here. They are in the Hall of the Dead, through that passage, there." The spirit pointed to an opening in the cavern wall, barely visible among the shadows.

"Stand aside, ghost."

The four mages parted for them to pass. The lead mage said, "You've proven your courage. We admire your tenacity and approve of your advance through these vaults." He turned to Bram. "Guard him well. He will need it."

Bram asked, "Will you help us? You four banished Lorelei long ago, imprisoning her in the mountain. Surely you can stop her again."

"Our power is contained within the land. The sorcerer, Darren, is siphoning that power to fuel his magic. A response from us will only increase his power. Alas, we can do nothing this time."

"I have lived through many battles and have fought beside the most valiant of warriors. If I were ever to fall, I'd hope my brother in arms would take up my sword and bloody it in my name," Alek said.

Bram noticed the contours of his face changing from tired features into hard, determined lines.

"Make your point," demanded the spirit.

Alek went on, "Since your connection to this place hinders you from using your magic against Darren, why not offer your powers to another who can wield it? I believe my friend Oskar, High Mage of Calmoren, is capable of such an honor."

The spirits mused over Alek's proposal. One answered for the others, "Our eternal purpose is to preserve the sanctity of the Everblade and prohibit the disturbance of its slumber. Our kingdom is gone, as is our concern over the fate of the world above. Once more, we will not assist in your endeavors."

Alek's hands balled to fists and he shouted, "Torea is only the beginning. Darren and Lorelei will conquer world after world unless we stop them. How can you be so selfish?" He did not give them a chance to respond. He motioned for Bram to follow him into the passage. "Listless wraiths, is all you are," he scorned. "I know well of your design now; you guard the Everblade because you are not fit to wield it."

They left the souls of the Elder Mages brooding over his words.



With Bram's spectral image lighting the corridor, Alek picked up the trail. He passed the skeletons, carefully stepping over them. The Hall of the Dead had grief etched into its black walls. His heart ached. He'd seen corpses, skulls and even dying men, but they were warriors that died in battle. The dead here, he knew, were ordinary people. No weapons. No armor.

"What were the final days of Everheart like?" he asked Bram.

"If this passage leads to where I think it does, you'll see for yourself." Bram halted and closed his eyes.

"What is it?"

"Your friends . . . I sense their presence."

Alek called out, "Oskar, can you hear me?"



Garwin stopped. His ears angled. "I heard a voice."

Oskar tipped his head to try and hear. "We've all been hearing voices."

"Listen."

The faint, distorted echo sounded again.

"Sounds like Alek," Garwin said. "It could be another trick. Ready your weapons."

They knelt and watched the darkness behind them. A soft light took form down the hall and brightened slowly as it drew near. Oskar's heart raced at the sound of Alek's voice but he knew that in the depths of the Barrens, on the edge of Everheart, all things should be questioned.

"That light is not magic or flame." Oskar lit his palms with crackling energy. "It can't be Alek."

Garwin urged, "Then don't hesitate. As soon as you have a shot, take it."

Oskar nodded.

They waited as the strange light approached. A silhouetted, human-shaped figure emerged within the light. Oskar assessed the image, searching for the origin of the light, but the figure carried no lantern or torch.

Garwin snarled, "What are you waiting for? We can't take any more chances. Shoot it!"

Oskar focused his magic and released a powerful current of lightning. The energy ripped down the hall, and they heard a groan as someone slammed against an opposing wall.

They heard a trembling voice call out again, "Oskar?"

Confused, Oskar ran down the hall. The others followed, stopping in horror at the sight of Alek's body lying still on the floor.

"Gods forgive what I've done," whispered Oskar. In tears, he knelt beside Alek. "Alek, my boy! I'm sorry. I didn't know!" He rolled Alek over and examined his face. The deep circles under his eyes and lines of weariness on his brow proved the warrior traveled a long time with little rest. He had tattered clothes and varying bruises and cuts. Then Oskar saw the mark, the scorch left by his own hand, his own magic. It burned through the fabric on Alek's chest and the smell of burned flesh singed Oskar's nose.

Joanell lifted Alek's head and rested it in her lap. She checked his pulse. "He's alive. But his heart is slow."

Oskar put his head in his hands. "I thought he was dead, but now, his life wanes from my doing. How could I have done this?"

Garwin lifted Alek's body with ease and said, "I'll carry him the rest of the way, however long it may be."

Bram's voice echoed, "Shouldn't be much longer, if memory serves me correctly."

Garwin snarled, "Who are you?"

Bram tapped into the group's collective energy and illuminated a few paces down the hall. "My name is Bram. Though a spirit now, I remain a son of Everheart."

"What is your business with us?" Garwin challenged.

"I've been helping Alek track you since he entered the Barrens. I intended to guide him to the ruins of Everheart once reunited with all of you."

"The gods have been kind," Joanell said.

Bram approached Joanell. "You're the Princess of Torea, are you not?"

"Yes, I am. How did you know?"

"I've seen into Alek's heart. It's there I found your face. He cares a great deal for you."

"And I for him. He saved my life and I will defend his in any way I can."

Bram bowed to honor her title. "Follow me then, Princess. Alek's life wavers. I can lead you all to a place where the will of the gods is strong. He'll need their mercy."

Bram directed them through the passage. Oskar followed, both

curious and slightly displaced that a spirit could take such form and was willing to help them. Every other spirit or wraith lost in the Barrens was a dark and angry soul.

The ghost joined Garwin. "You are a victim of Lorelei's wickedness. We share that misfortune. Still, you stand as resolute and true as any knight I've known."

"That's largely due to Alek."

Bram nodded. "He believed in you when your royal order did not."

"Indeed. And since he trusted you to lead him, I will uphold that trust. Do not give me cause to regret it."

Bram nodded and trailed back to Oskar. "You couldn't have known who approached. Release your guilt. It will only cloud your judgment."

"Good spirit, you are wise. Thank you for your support and for watching over my dear friend."

"Alek honors you like a father."

"I might as well have been his father, both he and Darren's," Oskar said. "You speak of guilt . . . mine is tangled and always growing deeper like the roots of a tree. And I am afraid. Not of Darren or Lorelei, but afraid that I am not powerful enough to oppose them."

Bram replied, "We are all afraid. Believe in yourself and your fears will give you strength." He drifted further up the hall and called back to the group. "We've reached the end of the Hall of the Dead. The Chamber of Refuge is ahead."

"We were shown a poem that told of a tomb after the Hall of the Dead," Joanell said.

"It is one and the same. Come, all will be understood. We must hurry; Alek needs help."



A large stone archway waited at the end of the hall. Joanell eyed the two heavy iron doors sealing the entrance to the cavern beyond. Joanell felt a sting of despair. The doors were solid with lifetimes of rust. How could they possibly open them? She looked at Alek, slumped over Garwin's shoulder, with renewed motivation. She asked Oskar, "Can you use your magic to part these old doors?"

The mage paused to think. "Lightning will not harm it. I cannot cast fire hot enough to weaken the hinges. Water and ice are useless and wind will be ineffective."

Joanell faced Garwin. "Then that leaves you."

Garwin nodded to the princess, dropped his pack, and laid Alek gently on the ground. "Stand back."

He bared his claws and slashed at the doors. Sparks streaked and the metal ripped like paper. Joanell shielded her eyes. In a wild blur

of animalistic wrath, Garwin's claws chewed through the heavy doors until there appeared an opening large enough for them pass.

They entered one by one. A domed ceiling rose over Joanell so high that shadows hid the apex. The smooth walls shimmered as if dusted with bits of diamond. As she stepped into the large room, ancient torches mounted throughout took light on their own, revealing the chamber's true grandeur.

Joanell gasped at the beauty surrounding her. No more did they stand in the dreary confines of an underground passage—they stood in the center of a long-forgotten, majestic cathedral to the gods. No more did her boots crunch over stones and sand; rather, they clopped, sending soft echoes throughout the room. The sound, so simple, brought a great deal of comfort. She closed her eyes for a moment and imagined she was home, walking in the halls of Castle Torea.

"Welcome to the Chamber of Refuge," Bram said.

Astounded, Oskar asked, "Did you light the room, Bram?"

"No. The chamber has awoken. It lit itself."

"Are you saying this place is alive?"

"In a way, yes. Let this room fill you with peace. You'll understand soon."

Carved pillars of marble, lined in silver and etched with holy runes, held the framework of the structure. Tall statues of the five gods lined the room, covered in centuries of dust. These mighty icons served as guardians of the hundreds of crypts embedded in the chamber walls. Joanell had never beheld such a grand and celebrated mausoleum.

A fountain remained in the center of the room. Sparkling water still filled its basin. Joanell traced her fingers over the surface, sending ripples dancing within. She looked into the water; her trembling image stared back—a face blackened with dirt and dried blood. Bram joined her, gazing into the fountain pool but found no reflection.

The princess asked, "How is it that this water has lasted?"

"It has lasted because it's supposed to."

"You speak riddles and poetry, Bram."

"I speak truth. As long as there is a fountain, there will be water."

"I don't understand," replied Joanell. "This entire hall is perfectly preserved. What makes that possible?"

"You've heard the saying, 'nothing lasts forever.' Well, that's a rule of time. There are concepts out there, like this fountain, like this place, that defies that rule. The only enforcer to time's rules is death. But death can only claim that which is living."

She faced him. "There are many things that are not alive. You mean to say it can all last forever?"

"I am not talking about the longevity of objects . . . *things*. I am talking about feelings, emotions and memories. Virtues endure,

Princess. They cannot die. Take me, for example. My body is gone but here I am. I remember my years and still feel the warm sun and cold night wind.

“Going back to this fountain, and this entire room—sometimes, our passions and sentiments are so great that we leave echoes of our hearts in the objects around us. Let me show you.” He pointed to a small pebble at her feet. “Take that stone in your palm and hold it in front of me.”

Joanell did as Bram asked. Bram placed his hand over hers. “I am thinking of a moment long ago, a particular summer day, when my son was just a boy. We fished along the stream on the edge of our farm. He was excited when he felt a tug on his line. I helped him pull in his first fish and though it was no bigger than his little hand, there was no greater fish in the entire world.”

Bram attempted to pick up the stone but his grasp passed through her hand, leaving a trail of vapor. “Now,” he said, “close your fingers around the stone. Hold it to your heart and shut your eyes. Concentrate on only the stone. Hear it. Feel it.”

The warmth of an afternoon sun warmed her face. The wind smelled sweet with summer flowers. She heard the rush of a small river and the laughter of a child. Then, in her mind, she saw Bram and his son by the bank. The boy cheered as he lifted the silver and green fish from the water. He held it up to show his father and reveled in the proud smile that met his eyes. Bram knelt beside him, tenderly showing him how to unhook the fish. Together, hand over hand, they let the little fish go. The boy chased it upstream until it vanished in the current.

The image faded from her mind, taking with it the smells and sounds. She opened her eyes and felt a tear fall down her cheek. This was odd to her because she didn’t feel sad. She wiped at it. “Why am I crying?”

“You’re not,” Bram replied. “I am. Through you.”

She rolled the pebble over in her palm.

“That memory is stained within that stone. It will be there forever. Do you understand now?” asked Bram.

The chamber shined around her. The standing tombs, mounted crypts, pews, tables, candelabra, and the icons resisted time’s eroding touch. The memories, love, pain, the very essence of the people of Everheart remained imbued in every aspect of the Chamber of Refuge. And so, as Bram said, it would last.

Joanell smiled at Bram. “Your people knew this, didn’t they?”

“That’s why we called our kingdom ‘Everheart.’ Love lasts, Joanell. It’s supposed to.”





Joanell helped Garwin place Alek in a soft chair resting near the base of the statue of Gladen. The god of wild things faced the fountain, as did the other statues. His mighty war axe hung on his back.

Garwin spoke a prayer. "Master of arms, great survivor, share your strength with this worthy warrior." Garwin stepped away then, leaving the wounded Alek to rest under Gladen's guard.

Joanell brushed a few strands of hair from his forehead and followed Garwin.

They joined the others, who gathered near a long concave wall presenting an elaborately painted mural. Oskar studied the art and interpreted it as a rendering of Everheart's former glory and final days.

Bram appeared in front of the painting. "Friends, the Chamber of Refuge is the only piece of Everheart not in ruin. This mural holds the memory of the lost city and of the people who lived and died here. This is not a painting you look at; rather, it is one you look into."

As their eyes panned the art, the colors pulled at the far reaches of their minds. A collective dreamlike vision ensnared them . . .

The screech of a swift hawk rang in their ears as a cold, rushing wind enveloped them. The eyes of the soaring bird opened, and the landscape of the Kingdom of Everheart passed below. A rich world of green forests, gray mountains, grassy fields, and winding rivers shined in the golden sunlight. Thin clouds parted, revealing a magnificent castle of brilliant white. Countless towers scraped the azure sky, each connected by lofty bridges and fanciful arching walkways.

Bram spoke then, starting a narration heard in their minds. "Four kingdoms ruled the regions of the world. None claimed as much magnificence as Castle Everheart. She stood as the jewel of the four empires. Some called her 'City of the Sword' but all knew her as the hold of King Julian Kalmore."

The hawk banked to the right and the world tilted, then leveled off as the path of flight descended. A mighty river, wrapped around the castle. High curtain walls, crenelated parapets, circular turrets, and flanking towers fortified the castle and community. Everheart was a community of districts, tiered and joined by a network of walls and roads, ruled by the lofty rise of the castle keep. Farmers, hunters, and craftsmen walked throughout the lower tier. Their small homes of wood and stone grouped along the riverbank.

As the hawk flapped its wings to swoop upward, the second tier came into view. Fountains sparkled, statues of nobles and knights stood proud and flower gardens added color to the courtyards. The extravagant homes of the kingdom's lords cast shadows on the lower

town.

Feelings of pride, honor, prosperity, and renown filled their hearts as the hawk's eyes panned the city streets. The people strolled through the districts. Some wore elaborate garb signifying their professions: artisans, clerics, scholars, tradesmen, knights, and mages.

The hawk cawed. The scene shifted and they flew outside the city. The wind carried them under the clouds as they followed the road along the river, leading away from Everheart. A sense of familiarity came to them, as if they had lived here their entire lives. They knew the names of the many villages surrounding Everheart; Elderbough along the south-winding river, Fall Hollow within the central forests, Rune's Landing at the eastern coast and Rimehold in the northern mountains.

The hawk dipped into the forest, skillfully cutting through the canopy. A light fog rolled on the mossy floor, giving body to the beams of sunlight stretching between the boughs. A grove of tall pines, spruce, and hemlocks came into view. Amid the swaying trees, the village of Fall Hollow thrived; a community built within the trunks of trees and throughout the network of branches. The kingdom revered Fall Hollow as a wonder of architecture and testament to the harmony of humanity and nature.

At its darkest edge loomed an old fortress covered in knotted vines and cloaked in shadow. A single tower rose from the center of the fortress keep. The hawk circled until Lorelei leaned from the highest window, with arms outstretched. Clouds formed over Fall Hollow and rolled over the land. Lorelei voiced a deadly incantation, and with her magical words, the clouds darkened. The storm spread fast, blotting out the sun.

Lorelei stepped onto her window's ledge and lifted into the air. She flew into the clouds, commanding the rain to begin. On the ground, the people watched the sky, confused and frightened. A foul scented rain fell onto their faces, burning their eyes and searing their skin. The raindrops evaporated on impact, releasing a sickening gas.

The hawk lifted higher into the air, to a steady flight over the kingdom. Screams of pain, sorrow and death carried on the wind. From the villages and farms, to the districts of the royal city, the malevolent tempest unleashed a deadly pestilence that killed all it touched.

Rain fell over the face of the hawk and the eyes of the great bird closed. A moment of darkness eclipsed, followed by the crackling burst of a lit torch.

A man in cleric's robes waved for them to follow. "This way, hurry," he called.

Masses of citizens rushed by them, filing into the narrow

passageways leading underground. Children cried in their mothers' arms. Men followed behind carrying weapons, food, and tools. The clerics urged them on. "We must get below ground to wait out the deadly storm. The Vault of the Gods will be our chamber of refuge."

Joanell heard the prayers for the preservation of the kingdom, the salvation of their families, and for the mighty Everblade to ward against the assault. These appeals were not entirely different than the ones they had made over the span of their journey. Though hopeful, sadness, fear, and confusion followed the people while a war waged on the surface.

Blackness returned to their minds where the image of a single tear took form, falling and breaking apart to tiny beads of blood.

The scene changed as the colors of the mural rippled like the water in the fountain . . .

A caravan of knights hiked through Lorelei's storm, shielding the rain with canopies of hide. Bram's voice echoed in their ears as the vision continued. "The Knights of Everheart marched south and ransacked Fall Hollow searching for the witch."

The knights kicked open doors with weapons drawn. They stepped over the many dead while they searched.

Bram continued his narration. "Lorelei met them, intent on asserting control of her keep. Wave after wave of knights fell by her magic. She hurled flames, lightning, and levitated boulders. She commanded the very trees to ensnare and crush them in their armor.

"Beyond the reach of the Everblade, Lorelei's treacherous magic succeeded. She killed indiscriminately, relishing in the groans of agony, crunching of bodies and the splatter of blood."

The ground around her fortress became littered with broken armor, the dying, and the dead.

"From the height of her dark tower," continued Bram, "the witch watched Castle Everheart darken in the distance. But there, on that royal horizon, a radiant white light ignited so intense, she recoiled from her window. The Elder Mages had come, staves aflame with magic to rival the gods.

"Everheart's four masters surrounded Lorelei's fortress, each angled his staff and shined a blinding light into her tower's chamber. She screamed, trying to avoid the light that would bind her. The tower rumbled and began to crack. They meant to bury her."

They looked on as Lorelei surrendered, giving herself to the four brilliant rays.

"The light entered her body," Bram explained, "claiming her ability to move. The Elder Mages combined their strength to hold her in place, just as Lorelei had hoped they would. She took in their combined power, and though trapped in the mage's binding light, her

strength magnified. Her final, and greatest, spell brought forth the end of our days. Behold . . .”

Lorelei’s chamber erupted in a burst of white fire that lit the sky and burned away the poisoned clouds. The fortress collapsed and the ground beneath it tore open, as if sinking under the weight of the falling tower. A massive quake split through the kingdom, devouring the forest, river, farms, and villages. The land became a colossal mouth that chewed everything in its path until its jaws opened under Everheart and pulled the entire city down. The kingdom’s capital and its glorious castle toppled, swallowed by Lorelei’s command.

Bram added, “Countless souls perished and with the fall of the castle, the Everblade was lost.”

The painting released them. Joanell’s head spun. She sat on a bench with Oskar. Garwin took a knee and rubbed his eyes.

Still looking at the elaborate mural, Bram concluded his account, “Here, in what was once the Vault of the Gods, the last survivors lived. They hid from the lingering sickness above. As the days became weeks, and the weeks to months, they began to understand that this would be their tomb. So, they painted this mural and it remains the only voice of a kingdom long forgotten. Lorelei’s pestilence eventually found its way here. As death claimed the last of my people, some accepted it and lay in tombs they had prepared. Families embraced and died together while others panicked, fleeing deeper underground. No one made it beyond the hall we passed.”

Bram turned to them. “The sons and daughters of Everheart have long since died. Our customs, traditions, and beliefs exist only in the memory of the ghosts who remain trapped here. Lost is our legacy and lineage.”

Oskar joined Bram. “You’re wrong, good spirit. Everheart’s lineage lived on.”

“How can that be?”

“Those who painted this mural did not know that the Elder Mages lived to seal away Lorelei and open a gateway to another land. They brought other survivors to a new, unsettled world. They established a new kingdom and named in tribute to Everheart’s King Kalmore—Calmoren, my home. There is a profound connection between the land now called Torea and Calmoren. This explains why Alek and I were cast here when Darren first opened the Gateway of Realms. Our realms are joined by a noble bloodline and a tragic past. They may also share a tragic future, one that is rapidly descending upon us.”

Joanell asked Oskar, “If the Elder Mages of Everheart are the forefathers of Calmoren, then how is it that Calmoren came to know of Torea?”

“It is right to assume the elders kept vigil over this realm.”

“And they just watched as Lorelei awakened to destroy us and then wrote about it?” she questioned.

“Perhaps they did not have the power to return. Keep in mind, Princess, as of now, the Legend of Torea known in Calmoren has not fully come to pass. Thanks to Darren’s meddling with the Gateway of Realms, we have a chance to intervene.”

Joanell smiled at the thought.

Oskar continued, “The Elder Mages of Everheart *are* the Elder Mages of Calmoren.” He lit his hands with magic fire and stared thoughtfully into it. He clasped his palms, snuffing out the flame. “I wield the magic of Everheart.”

From behind, Alek’s tired voice interrupted, “And I will wield its sword.”

They turned to see their beloved warrior standing. Alek, still weary, began to lose his balance. Joanell hurried to his side and supported him, taking his heavy arm over her shoulders.

Her teary eyes met his. “Don’t die on me again. I need you.”

**A**lek took comfort in the sanctity of the

Chamber of Refuge. He washed in the fountain and rested in the pews.

“Now,” Alek said, rising from his seat. “I think it’s time we move on.” He tightened his baldric, shifted his scabbard over his shoulder, then threw on his cloak. “We’re getting closer to the Everblade. I’m not sure how, but I just know.” He pulled his Crownwater sword free and thumbed its edge. He looked to Bram. “Take us to the ruins of Everheart.”



The wind howled through the tunnel, intensifying as Alek approached an opening to the outside. The sound of the river returned. Cold, white moonlight welcomed him as he stepped out from the underground world and into the night. They had come to the heart of a giant gorge, where sloping stone walls surrounded them and massive boulders commanded the flowing river.

The moon illuminated the valley of rocks, revealing an endless wreckage of toppled battlements and piles of sarsen stones that once formed the castle walls. The remnants of four towers leaned like skeletal monuments refusing to fall. The stone pillars that once served as the castle framework stretched up from the debris like a disjointed ribcage, casting long shadows in the moonlight. The wind rushed through the valley, coursing over the river and sweeping through the ruins.

Alek thought he heard the distant echoes of people weeping but knew that they were, once again, sounds of lost spirits.

“This is what’s left of Everheart,” Bram said. “Tread lightly.”

As they hiked over the sarsens and scaled crumbling walls, they passed relics that spoke for the lost grandeur of the civilization. Scattered throughout the area endured large flower pots, arching stone doorways, plates of stained glass hanging from crooked window frames, toppled fountains covered in moss, and cold hearths, some still bearing cooking spits.

The group pressed on, moving through portions of the ruins where

sections of city roads remained. Though tilting and near collapse, several buildings remained intact with darkened doorways gaping like empty mouths. Ghostly sounds of children playing, men hollering, and women laughing carried on the wind that wailed through the valley.

Their cloaks rustled as their footsteps echoed. They followed the moonlight with torches in hand. The shadows danced away from their flames.

Oskar panned the sky. "I do not see Darren's aurora. I thought he would be amassing power from these old ruins."

Bram replied, "He is elsewhere in the Barrens; likely in the ruins of Fall Hollow. The Everblade still rules this place, so Darren's wickedness has no authority here. He and Lorelei know that."

"What stems from Fall Hollow that aids Lorelei?" Oskar asked.

"No one ever knew for sure."

"They must have speculated."

"Indeed. Some told that Lorelei was the superior figure of an abhorrent tribe of sorcerers. Others claimed she was the exiled sister of the king and due ruler of Everheart. I even heard that she was the incarnate demon-born sibling of the gods, banished from the heavens."

"A sixth deity?" Joannell asked.

"Yes. The corrupted."

Alek figured she was more like Darren, just a ruined mage, a sorceress too hungry for power. Alek looked ahead as they moved on, contemplating the rumors. Like many things, they had come about because someone didn't understand.

The morning's light did little to brighten the valley of ruins. A misty rain fell from dense, gray clouds. Fog blanketed the land, almost masking the fallen city entirely. They continued their exploration with torches in hand and magic aglow while rain dripped from their faces and tendrils of fog curled around their boots.

"This fog hides everything but those four towers," Garwin said. "It's no wonder this place has been lost for so long."

Alek's eyes lifted to the ancient structures reaching from the fog. "Four towers, you say? I count five."

"Your vision is flawed, Alek," Garwin remarked. "There are only four towers, though there isn't much left to them."

"I see the four you speak of but there is another. You don't see it? It's there." He pointed. "It stands without damage, as strong as the towers of Castle Torea."

The others looked into the distance.

Alek said, "Bram, come forth."

The ghost appeared. "What is it, Alek?"

"Do you see five towers?"

"I see only four. Perhaps the lines of prose that burned on the passage wall are proving true."

Oskar recalled the poem, "The sword will call from its tower concealed. In the warrior's eye, the king's wrath revealed."

Alek's Crownwater sword began to tremble in his hand. At first, he thought the chill of the rain was getting to him, but his hands did not feel cold. The sword shuddered, as it would when meeting an opposing blade, and rang with the chime of winding steel. He steadied the weapon and lifted it to examine its edge. In the flat of the sword, a man's face reflected back at him.

The man glared at Alek. He had long black hair and wore a short black beard over his lips and chin. His cheeks were pale and his deep brown eyes rested firmly in the hollows of his face. A golden, jewel-encrusted circlet adorned his forehead, holding back his black mane.

He spoke to Alek. "The Everblade sees all. You gamble with your life. You have been warned." The reflection faded.

Bram exclaimed, "By the gods! That was King Julian Kalmore!"

Alek put his sword away. "Oskar, can you do something about this fog? I must get to that tower."

Oskar fanned his arms and called a boundless wind. The fog swirled as it blew upward and into the sky. The group hurried through the ruins as Alek led them toward the tower only he could see.

The massive, cylindrical structure shined with droplets of rain. Narrow loopholes, where archers once roosted, stared out over the valley. Broken battlements and the rubble of eroded curtain walls stretched from the base. An arching wood doorway, the height of three men, faced him. The large, double doors remained shut.

Alek grabbed the wide handles and pushed. The doors did not move. He called for Garwin and Joanell. "Help me get these doors open."

"Alek, there is nothing there," Joanell insisted.

"You can't see it, but you might be able to feel it. Just try."

No solid structure, visible or invisible halted them. Alek watched his friends walk through solid stone. He took a step back as they emerged again, passing through the very door he could not budge.

"If there is a tower here, it exists only for you," Garwin said.

"Then no one will mind if I open it the way I opened Oskar's tower in Calmoren. Stand aside."

Alek took a few paces back, drew his sword, then charged the door. He leapt into the air, swinging his weapon in a diagonal sweep from shoulder to hip. His Crownwater sword slashed true and split the wooden doors. With his body turned from the momentum of the strike, he drove his exposed shoulder into the doors, bursting them to shards. He fell into the tower and rolled to his feet.



Alek squinted in the bright sunlight. He had fallen into a courtyard surrounded by tall stone walls. All around him, flowers of endless colors bloomed. Small white butterflies fluttered about the greenery. A sweet, rose scented breeze came to him and he looked up to see blue sky and thin white clouds.

A hand grabbed his shoulder. He spun with sword poised, and found King Kalmore standing in a silver cloak and robes of deep blue.

"Welcome to my garden, Alek. Do you know who I am?"

"I've been told you are Everheart's ruler. Honor to you." Alek drove his sword into the ground and knelt in respect.

"I appreciate your gallantry, warrior. Though, I am not your king. You hold no fealty to my banner. Rise."

"Where am I? Is this Everheart?"

"No. This is but a memory of Everheart. It is the dream of a sleeping sword."

"King Kalmore, my brother has committed unspeakable crimes against Torea, as Lorelei did to Everheart. They have joined forces and seek to claim world after world. It is said the Everblade has the power to stop them. Where is it?"

"It is there." King Kalmore fanned his long cloak to reveal a tiered pedestal of marbled stone.

The Everblade hovered inches above the pedestal's surface. Its deadly tip pointed to the ground, while the handle spun in a wide circle. Its point remained fixed while the hilt revolved like the hand of a great clock.

Alek approached and studied the fabled sword.

The Everblade, magical icon of a fallen kingdom, guardian weapon of King Kalmore's empire, no longer shined. Its blade was blackened, dull, and tarnished. Rust and oxidation masked the beauty of the ornate hilt and coated the jewels, robbing them of their color. It seemed to Alek that the sword would crumble to dust if touched.

King Kalmore came to stand beside Alek. "Not what you expected, is it?"

"No. This cannot be the legendary sword."

"Oh, but it is. For many ages, the Everblade has absorbed cruelty, hatred, malice, greed, and sadness. Those qualities have darkened it."

"It's become sick," said Alek.

"Yes."

"Can it be forged anew?"

"No. It needs to be purified. The centuries of darkness must be channeled out of the weapon," the king said.

"How?"

"By the exchange of masters. If the old master dies, his soul will draw the darkness from the sword and carry it out of the mortal realm

as he passes.”

“What then?” Alek asked.

“Then the sword will awaken, good, pure, and powerful. It will be bound to the new master.”

“So I need to defeat the current master to claim and purify the sword?”

“That is correct.”

“Fine. Who must I fight?”

The king threw back his cloak. “Me.”

King Kalmore snatched the handle of the Everblade as it spun toward him. He pulled it from the pedestal and held it over his head. The garden of flowers and sunlight darkened, melting away as shadows swallowed the area. The garden changed to become a dimly lit tower chamber.

Alek could hear Oskar and the others calling for him. Joanel shouted, “Alek! Where are you?”

Alek leapt back as a burst of purple lightning flashed from the Everblade and coursed around King Kalmore. The purple energy changed the king, conjuring thick plates of blackened steel armor over his legs, chest, and arms.

“Do you see what I’ve become? So much pain, misery and malevolence—in time, the sword embodies it, as does its master. You must understand and accept this before you can wield this weapon.”

The purple energy crackled and hissed throughout the room. The stone floor trembled and began to crack. Bits of rock started to float and swirl about them. The black sword glowed with an unnerving violet light.

“Then you have been consumed by evil?” Alek asked.

“No. If that were so, I wouldn’t be here now. The sword would have destroyed me,” the king said. “I master the Everblade because I am strong enough to endure it. The sword is like a beast that must be tamed. Only great discipline can command great power. Now . . . if you seek to claim the Everblade, let us duel, and do so to the death.”

“As you wish.” Alek dropped into his fighting stance and angled his Crownwater sword for combat.

Kalmore rushed Alek with supernatural speed. The tip of the Everblade streaked for Alek’s heart, but Alek was too perceptive. He had noticed the shift of Kalmore’s boots, which indicated a lunging advance, and made his leftward side-step early. As Kalmore’s thrust raced by, Alek swung his sword down atop the Everblade, hoping to knock it from Kalmore’s grip. To Alek’s surprise, the force of his attack hardly shook the Everblade.

Brilliant sparks flashed at the clashing of the steel. Kalmore squared with Alek, suspending his sword laterally to brace against Alek’s. The

Crownwater sword pushed down on the flat of the Everblade with no affect. Then, with immeasurable strength, Kalmore pushed his black sword upward. Alek held tightly to his weapon, feeling the handle slipping in his palm. Kalmore drove his boot into Alek's chest, knocking him to the ground. The Crownwater sword chimed as it fell from his hand.

Kalmore kicked Alek's sword across the room, into the shadows. Alek searched for anything he could use to defend himself but found only the light of the broken doorway; beyond which, he saw the rainy valley of ruins and his friends searching for him.

Kalmore approached. "Down already? It's clear that you are not worthy to wield this sword." The Everblade flickered with a searing, purple energy.

Alek shuffled backward, sliding on his hands and heels, to the doorway.

Kalmore followed and lifted the Everblade over his head, ready to deliver a fatal stroke. "In this realm, I cannot be bested," he said.

"Exactly what I thought." Alek did a handspring and launched the sole of his boot into Kalmore's face. The dark king staggered back from the blow. Alek pounced on him, hooked his strong arms around the king's chest, and hurled him through the doorway.

They rolled down the stony embankment, crashing through piles of ancient debris. Dirt and rocks rolled down around them, bouncing off Kalmore's heavy armor and bruising Alek's body. Alek landed on top of Kalmore and pinned him to the ground, punching him time and again.

Garwin moved in to assist, bounding over the castle wreckage. Just as he closed in, an intense purple blast flared from the Everblade. The eruption of light blew Garwin and Alek backward, hurtling them into a mound of stones. Garwin landed atop Alek, saving him from the collapsing rocks. The forceful collision and falling stones knocked the man-beast unconscious.

Oskar gathered the wind, lifted into the air and flew toward the king. With hands burning red, he swooped over Kalmore, unleashing a blazing stream of fire. The arc of flames fell over Kalmore, but the king braced the Everblade over his head and a protective dome glowed around him. Oskar's firestorm scorched the ground.

Unharmd, Kalmore pointed the sword at the mage. A trident of lightning flashed from the Everblade and ripped through the sky. Oskar cast a short barrier in front of him, but did not have time to fan it to full strength. The lightning bolt destroyed his guard and struck him down. He fell, landing hard atop the dunes of broken stones.

Alek rolled Garwin's massive frame aside but found King Kalmore standing tall over him. He pressed the Everblade's blackened tip

against Alek's heart.

The king said, "Perhaps now you understand what it means to be the bearer of the blade."

Joanell appeared atop a boulder to the right of Kalmore, who remained focused on Alek. She pointed to the remnants of a broken wall to Alek's left, just behind Kalmore. There, the Oremann forged sword shined in the misty rain. Joanell called out to King Kalmore, "You there! I order you to yield!"

Joanell locked eyes with Kalmore. Her hair waved in the wind like a war banner. Alek seized the opportunity and slipped away. He crawled for the Oremann sword.

Kalmore shouted to Joanell, "Who are you to command me?"

"I am Joanell Foss, ruler of Toreia Kingdom. I said yield!"

"The might of your rule pales against the strength of the Everblade."

Joanell challenged, "Do you know what the strongest part of the sword is?"

Alek let out a battle cry and swung the Oremann sword down over Kalmore's wrist, severing his hand from his arm. The Everblade fell to the ground.

Alek looked to Joanell and answered, "The hand that wields it."

A blinding beam of purple light blazed from King Kalmore's wound. A net of crackling energy enveloped him and disintegrated his black armor. He fell to his knees.

Alek picked up the Everblade and stabbed him in the heart. The sword remained in Kalmore's chest as he fell backward. The king reached up with his remaining hand and touched the Everblade. The sword started to glow. Its radiance intensified, forcing the group to shield their eyes. Kalmore's physical form hardened to stone and crumbled, collapsing like the ruins of his castle.

The Everblade stood upright, hilt pointed at the sky. No longer did its body suffer the weight of rust. Everheart's magical sword shined brighter than any Alek had ever seen. The silver blade was as clean and reflective as the surface of a summer lake.

The fuller tapered as it climbed toward the hilt of gold. The ornate crossguard braced the strong of the sword, clamping around the blade with arms of bejeweled gold and silver. A large sapphire gleamed in the hilt's center, but the most striking feature of the sword was the finely cut crystal adorning the pommel. Sturdy prongs of gold clutched the clear crystal, protecting its pristine edgings. Deep inside the sparkling stone, at its core, a soft violet glow pulsed but its cadence slowed.

Alek felt his breath shortening, as if something pulled the air from his lungs. His heart thumped in his chest; its pace weakening in time

with the crystal's diminishing light. He staggered, light-headed from the want of air. He stumbled and fell to the rocks. His vision darkened.

Soon, the only thing visible was the Everblade, mere feet before him. He reached for the sword's handle. The closer his fingers got, the heavier his arm felt. *The crystal is its heart and it is dying. It's taking my strength, my life, for its own*, thought Alek.

Alek saw his friends moving to help him. They pressed forward in struggle, as if fighting to advance through the force of a phantom gale. The sword's powerful energy held them back.

The world moved around Alek as it might in a dream. The sky above and the landscape beyond quivered like water. He cried out as he reached for the sword with the last of his will. His arms trembled and his chest heaved. His body felt like stone and darkness crept over the corners of his eyes, threatening to take his vision. The cold grip of the Everblade kissed his fingertips as his hand fell away.

Alek felt a cool touch around his wrist. His eyes opened and he briefly saw the tangled hair of Joanell. Her hand closed over his. She wrapped the warrior's fingers around the sword's grip. A surge of energy flooded him. He pulled the sword from the ground, and lifted it high over his head. The crystal's light revitalized and radiated around Alek.

Thunder boomed. Lightning tore from the clouds, streaking down and coursing through the sword. Alek's body lifted into the air, pulled upward by the sword. He hovered over the others, gripping the handle with both hands, and screamed as the magic of the Everblade transformed him.

His wounded skin healed and the grime of his travels dissolved. The magic worked over his clothing, turning his tattered tunic to a soft, black gambeson and a breastplate of gold-inlaid steel. The weathered red cloak fell away and in its place unfurled a long cape of brilliant white. Golden pauldrons covered his shoulders with overlapping plates trailing down his arms. His torn leggings became a pair of silver greaves, complimenting steel-plated black boots.

The transformation ended as Alek lowered to the ground. The Everblade crackled in his hand and hummed as he swung it to feel its balance. The crystal's light pulsed in time with his heart; steady, bright and strong.

Joanell said, "You look glorious."

Alek took her hand in his. "How did you break through the will of the sword?"

"Simple. I filled my mind with thoughts of peace, warmth, and love. I thought of you."

Alek kissed her hand, and then slid the sword into its scabbard.

“Let’s take back Torea.”

# In Castle Torea

**T**he streets of Torea City were silent. Survivors of Lorelei's attack and malicious storm hounds had fled to other cities, hoping to find refuge among others who might have prevailed.

Lorelei stepped onto the terrace and looked to the east. "Can you feel that?" she asked Darren, who had come up behind her.

"Feel what?"

"There is something heavy in the air. It weighs on me, pulls at me."

"I don't feel it."

She turned on him. "You're doing this, aren't you?"

"I suggest you refrain from making such accusations."

She reached for him but lost her balance and fell forward. Darren caught her and held her against his chest. "What's wrong?"

"My power is weakening. If you're not the cause, it can only be . . ."

"The Everblade."

With Darren's help, she crawled into bed. Darren brought a washbowl and rag. He blotted the wet rag on the back of her neck to sooth her tension. She took the washbowl onto her lap and waved a glowing hand over the water. The bowl shimmered with a green light and the water clouded with blood.

Lorelei whispered her incantation. "Pride of Everheart, bane of forces dark, reveal yourself."

The image of the royal fleet, pitching and yawing over the Silver Sea, took form in the red water. She studied the scene and asked, "What is that strange ship leading the fleet? It is not a battle ship."

Darren peered into the bowl. "It is a slaver's ship."

## Chapter 20

Joanell and the others grouped at the bow of the ship and watched the coastline, where the distant shape of Castle Torea rose over the sea.

Alek said to Tuck, "After hiking back through the Barrens, it was a nice surprise to find this ship, and the royal fleet, anchored beyond the bay. I appreciate that you waited for me."

"We couldn't just leave you. After you set out in the rowboat, we decided to wait a while. We figured it was the least we could do after you restored our freedom. As for the royal fleet, that was a surprise to us."

Commander Fathion joined the group, bowing to Garwin. Fathion said, "I didn't know which god to pray to, so I prayed to them all. Glad to see you well."

"It's good to see you again, Commander," Garwin said. "It is most fortunate that you were able to lead the fleet away from the witch's storm."

"Just following orders."

"Ah, yes, the king's plan of attack; mobilize the fleet and sweep the Barrens."

Fathion added, "And there's more. With the death of King Foss, the Barons of the Six Cities have coordinated a collective assault on Torea City. They mean to take back the capital and reclaim the castle."

"When is this to occur?"

"The forces have already mobilized. What are your orders now, Captain?"

Garwin stepped aside, bringing Joanell into the fold of the conversation. "It is for Joanell to decide." He spoke his next words loud enough for all to hear. "I present Queen Regnant, Joanell Foss."

All onboard stopped and bowed, Alek included. Joanell called for them to rise as the weight of her new title nearly dropped her to her knees. *Queen.*

Rarely had her father spoken the word; rather he used "your mother," or "my wife." Those titles were warm, pure and forged with love. For the first time in her life she wondered, *what makes a queen?*

With a shaky breath, she pulled back her shoulders and held up her



chin. The wind tossed her hair aside. Her eyes met Alek's. *Kindness*. Through everything he had endured, all he'd seen and learned, the warrior still looked at her the way he did while they danced. *Sincerity*. Though noticeably tired, he straightened his posture while in her presence. *Respect*. He shifted his sights toward the coast and rested his hand on the pommel of his sword, his eyes narrowed, and she guessed his thoughts centered on what was to come. *Courage*.

The unwavering virtues he embodied just by standing there were almost tangible. He inspired her and she realized then that she was of the same quality. Her father made sure of it. What more could Torea want in a queen?

Fathion came before her and asked, "My queen, we await your commands of offense or defense. We are closing in on Torea Kingdom, advancing in the eye of the enemy."

Joanell stepped away, her eyes lingering on the coastline of her beloved city. Just as her heart started to ache with sadness, she felt a hand close over hers. Alek stood by her. She said to him, "I've never commanded men. How do I rightly direct the lives of others?"

"Each man holds his own life in his hands. Regardless of the way it may seem now, you're not deciding their fate. They choose to follow you, and as such, elect the path of their lives. You are their queen, the embodiment of everything Torea stands for. When you speak, it is the voice of the kingdom they hear."

She heard Fathion comment to Garwin, "We need a battle plan. There isn't much time."

Alek glanced at Fathion and then whispered to Joanell, "There's always time."

Joanell sighed, releasing her tension. Looking at the castle high atop the coastal bluffs, she no longer saw her home. Black clouds surrounded the towers where flashes of red lightning flickered. This was the lair of brooding darkness, and the new keep of her father's killer. Though the sky was blue over the sea, heavy clouds hung above the land.

The death caused by Darren and Lorelei was immeasurable, just as it had been so long ago. She recalled the mural in the Chamber of Refuge. The scenes of Castle Everheart falling into the chasm filled her mind. Joanell knew what she had to do.

She leaned up and kissed Alek on the cheek. With every man aboard listening to her, she formally addressed her friends, doing her best to sound like a confident leader.

"Captain Garwin, High Mage Oskar, and Sword Master Alek, you will accompany me on land. Commander Fathion, you are hereby ordered to fire your cannons at the castle in one hour."

"My queen, is this really what you want?" Fathion asked.

Joanell glared at him. "You've heard my orders, Commander. You have one hour. Destroy Castle Torea. Drop it into the sea."



Joanell suited up for war. Discarding her worn leather armor, she adorned a cuirass of shining steel. Over the armor, she wore a tabard of white and gold bearing the Torea Royal Crest, tied at the waist with a shimmering blue sash that trailed around her legs. A white mantle covered her shoulders and clasped to the collar of her cuirass. She fastened the scabbard of the Oremann blade to a baldric and secured the weapon to her back. A pair of plated leather boots and steel greaves protected her legs.

Alek found her heading to the rowboat at the starboard bow.

"I found this in the weapons hold below deck." He tossed her a silver battle helmet with a Y-shaped open face. A long, white plume of horse hair hung from the top. She tied back her hair and pulled the helm over her head. He said, smiling, "I knew it would look nice on you."



Alek, Garwin, Oskar, and Joanell sat in the rowboat as the men lowered it to the waves. Once free of the tethers, Oskar stirred the surface of the ocean, coaxing the water to move them to the shore.

As they cut across the ocean, the old mage asked Joanell, "Tell me why we're separating from the security of the fleet?"

Keeping her eyes on the castle, she answered, "Now that we have The Everblade, it does little good to be out at sea." She paused, remembering the sight of Lorelei standing on the terrace, the king dead at her feet. "And, I want to hear Lorelei scream when the castle falls around her."

After making land, they abandoned the boat, hurried over the beach and started for the castle. Joanell and the others stopped their trek when the echoes of war horns and rolling battle drums filled the air. A wall of knights and armed citizens came into view, riding over the highland hills toward the royal city. Banners of the six cities rippled in the wind. War horns blew and battle drums rolled.

Joanell exclaimed, "The subjugated have risen!"

"Of course they have," Garwin said. "I think the Queen of Torea and the Captain of the Royal Guard should meet them."

Joanell nodded. "Let's hurry."

The six cities of Torea cheered for Joanell and saluted Garwin. Joanell took a knight's horse and trotted along the line of people. A silence fell over the crowd as she looked into their eyes.

She addressed them. “My good people, in the name of Torea, and all kingdoms past, we gather now to reclaim Torea City. This, or die with honor and for the memory of those we’ve lost. I am Joanell Foss, daughter of Yolfere the third, and Queen of Torea.” She drew her sword; its chime seemed to echo over the land. “And I will lead you into battle.”

The people roared, ready to storm the city, but as they moved forward, a burning portal opened. Coils of crackling red magic seared the ground as Darren emerged. The portal closed and he stood alone on a grassy hill above the crowd.

“Is this gathering for me? I am honored.”

Joanell and Garwin stepped forward. Joanell ordered, “Surrender in the name of Torea Kingdom.”

“I will not.”

Alek stepped from the crowd, threw back his cloak, and pulled the Everblade from its scabbard. “Then surrender in the name of Everheart.”

The sword ignited with a brilliant white light. Alek’s golden armor shined.

Joanell saw the blade’s luminous force push Darren backward. His knees trembled as his energy slowly started to dissolve. He reopened the portal and vanished, only to reappear on the other side of the crowd. Citizens, armed with various weapons, charged him but halted when Darren cast a scorching wall of fire. With a flick of his wrist, the firewall lurched forward, arching through the crowd.

The screams of the dying carried over the field. Darren lifted into the air, red magic coursing around his body. The knights fired arrows at the sorcerer but they burned to ash in the air around him. Darren created a large ball of fire over his head and fanned it to life. The people cowered as the growing fireball took the shape of an enormous, winged dragon.

In a blast of vicious heat, the fire dragon beat its blazing wings and swooped over the crowd, raining fatal fire as it soared. Darren vanished in a burst of red light.

Oskar leaped into the air, fists glowing with cold blue energy. He flew after the dragon, dodging its trailing bands of fire.

Joanell rode her horse to Alek’s side and shouted over the roaring crowd. “I informed the Knight Commanders to keep the people away from the castle. Get on; I’m leading the people into the city and I need your help.”

Alek shifted the Everblade in his hand. Joanell searched his face as he kept his eyes on Darren’s dragon. They lost sight of Oskar in the plumes of smoke and hanging, gray clouds.

Joanell reached out her hand, “Alek,” she shouted, regaining his

attention, "I can't do this without you."

Alek reached up and took her hand. She pulled him up on the horse and the two rode over the hillside, passing through the city gates and down the narrow roads. Garwin ran behind, waving the crowd to follow.



Each time the dragon screeched, an inferno blew forth. Oskar pressed on, keeping a shield of cold energy in front of him to disperse the intense heat. The dragon dipped and twisted through the air; Oskar could not command the wind as sharply and struggled to keep his pace. The dragon dove and leveled its flight mere feet from the ground, leaving a black trail of burning grass behind it. It chased after the people as they rushed for the city.

Oskar forced the wind to carry him faster. He ripped through the clouds, streaking across the sky like a shooting star. The world moved by him in a blur. He dropped to the ground outside the city and hollered to the knights guarding the main gates, "Lower the portcullis once all are inside!"

The fire dragon raced over the land burning everything, and everyone, in its path. The ghostlike creature of living flame stared at Oskar as it rushed for the city gates. The portcullis dropped and Oskar turned his magic on the metal barricade, coating the bars with ice.

The dragon screeched as it closed in on Oskar. He had nowhere to go. He crouched down and, using his remaining energy, cast a dome of ice over his body. The dragon passed through Oskar, dispelling his barrier and swallowing him in a mass of concentrated flame. Oskar screamed as the fire disintegrated his robes and melted his skin. The last thing he saw was the dragon's body colliding with the frozen portcullis. The bars of ice extinguished it, reducing Darren's creature to a cloud of sweltering steam.



Lorelei applauded Darren. "Well done. The field is littered with charred bodies, strewn about like beautiful dead roses. The petals all stuck in place, but the life has been extinguished leaving a tangible memory of the frailty of the soul. And I must say, the dragon of flames was just lovely."

Darren wiped the sweat from his brow and gave a smirk. "I've always had an affinity for fire. More importantly, the old mage is dead."

"What of the Everblade?"

"Alek has it. The closer he gets, the weaker we'll become. We need

to stop him.”

“I’ve released the rest of my storm hounds to devour those who entered the city. They’ll rip him apart.”

“Good.” Darren couldn’t shake the image of Alek and the Everblade from his mind. Thoughts of anger brewed within him.

*Curse you, brother! I hope Oskar’s death splits your heart. You forced my hand and perhaps now you understand what I am capable of. You can fight to save this land all you wish, but you’ll see that this is only the beginning.*



The city streets resounded with the growls and wails of storm hounds. The ringing of swords, the twang of bows, and the crushing of armor encapsulated the city. The roadways crowded with men-at-arms, knights, and rancorous hounds.

The hounds howled as they cut down lines of men and the knights hollered as they slayed packs of beasts with flaming arrows and swift steel.

Joanell’s horse reared in fright, neighing loudly and nearly bucking her from the saddle. The stone roads shimmered with lines of scarlet blood, the same roads she ran along in play as a child. To see a battle raging in her home pained Joanell’s heart, but it was not sadness that chilled her blood.

Joanell felt a quiet anger frame her spirit. *I must press on*, she thought. *Keep moving for the castle.* The battle around her became a blur; only Castle Torea was clear in her vision. Her eyes scaled the height of the keep, to her father’s royal terrace. *The Queen has returned, witch. Your end is near.*

Garwin shouted over the deafening battle, “Where is Oskar? He should be with us by now.”

Joanell replied, “He may already be waiting at the keep.”

Joanell kicked the side of her horse and hurried to Castle Torea’s keep, stopping at the main doors. They paused when they heard the grunting of Lorelei’s beasts within.

Alek reached to his belt and took up Bram’s skull. Bram took form. “What is it, Alek?”

“I need you to locate Oskar.”

Bram closed his eyes and after a brief moment, responded, “I do not feel his presence.”

“Find him,” Alek ordered.

Bram nodded and disappeared.

With Garwin and Joanell ready, Alek drew the Everblade and kicked open the large doors. The light of the sword illuminated the great hall, where over a dozen storm hounds waited.



ram knelt next to Oskar's body. He could hardly recognize the

mage's face under the peels of charred skin. Smoking strands of cloth, once his proud robes, fluttered about the area like crisp autumn leaves.

The sounds of the battle for Toreia City surrounded Bram, resonating in a muddled blur. As he stared at Oskar's scorched remains, the world moved around him as a spiraling mosaic of chaos.

*I've seen all this before. Once again, this has become a time of sorrow and doom.* Then his sadness started to lift and he wondered how this could be. He felt warmth within him. Standing around he and Oskar, gathered the spirits of Everheart's four Elder Mages. One reached down with an open hand. Bram accepted and was pulled to his feet.

"Alek was right," said the Elder. "Darren and Lorelei must be stopped; not merely for the sake of our world, but for others as well."

"Why have you come now?" Bram asked.

"We've come to do as Alek suggested; grant our power to Oskar. Our combined magic will renew him, and reunite his body and spirit."

"Will he know what you've done?"

"Yes. And, he will know everything we know. Our spirits will be forever bound to his. Now, stand aside, Bram."

The Elder Mages made a circle around Oskar's body. They joined hands and bowed their heads. Bram watched as their apparitions softened to mist and clouded over Oskar, concealing the charred body. In the core of the spiritual cloud, a soft blue light started to glow. Bram gasped when Oskar's hand reached from the mist, clean and unharmed. Slowly, the cloud trailed away. There crouched Calmoren's High Mage, clad in robes of silver, blue, and white. His body wore no traces of the dragon's wrath.

Oskar looked up at Bram and said, "I'm all right." He ignited a blazing orb of crackling blue energy and rolled the surging sphere from one palm to the other. "And Toreia will be as well."



The great hall lay in soiled ruin. Eviscerated corpses of fallen knights filled the hall with a putrid stench. The hounds charged with opened

claws and dripping fangs.

As Alek moved to defend against the attack, a shining orb of blue light appeared in the center of the room and exploded in a blinding flash. Alek staggered back, stunned. He rubbed his eyes to clear his sight and found every hound frozen in place, transformed to a marble stone. Oskar stood in the center of the room in his majestic garb.

Alek approached the mage. The Everblade hummed in his hand as if sensing Oskar's power. He asked, "What happened to you? You look twenty years younger!"

"And I feel twenty times more powerful."

"I can see that." Alek examined one of the marble hounds and touched its side.

*To turn a beast to stone, amazing, he thought. If everyone could do this, there would be no warriors. But when magic fails or the mages fall, what is left in war?* He brought his sword up and examined its sharp edge. *Steel.*

Alek felt Oskar's hand pressing down on his armored shoulder. "Trust in my abilities as I trust in yours, my boy. The Elder Mages have joined with me, giving me their combined magical knowledge. My strength is enhanced by their spiritual power."

Alek slid the Everblade into its scabbard. "Who is stronger, you or Darren?"

"Think of it this way: if your brother's magic is the thunder, mine is the storm."

"Can you best him now?"

Oskar's eyes flashed with blue light.

Alek nodded, confident in Oskar's new form. "What of the witch?"

Joanell stepped between them, sword in hand. "Lorelei is mine."



A sharp pain rippled through Darren's body. He doubled over and spat up blood.

Lorelei hurried to his side. "What's happening?"

"My power . . . something has changed . . ." Darren listened, feeling the dimensional matter for a magical resonance. The drumming of Oskar's immeasurable power shocked him. "We should go."

"Go? Where?"

"Anywhere. With the Gateway of Realms, the farthest places are a step away."

"And abandon my castle? I am queen. I rule this land."

Darren forced himself to stand tall. He loomed over her and challenged, "Maybe you don't fully understand. The Everblade is in this castle. It's warding against our magic and robbing us of our strength. I can open the Gateway and we can escape. Forget this place.

There are other worlds to command.”

Lorelei’s eyes filled with green light. She glared at him and Darren felt a surge of power swirl around her. *She’s strong*, he thought, *and it’s not my power she uses*.

The witch spoke gravely, a tone he had not heard her use with him before. “I’ve grown tired of your posturing and weary of your almighty arrogance. I’ve waited too long to rule and will not be defeated again.”

“Is that so?” Darren asked. “What will you do against the Everblade?”

Lorelei’s eyes locked onto his. He felt her probing magic rip through his memories, reaching to the farthest corners where his mind met his soul. He tried to force her out but she was too strong.

“You’re scared,” she said. “The mage is not dead. He seeks you with strength greater than yours. And the Everblade . . . your brother wields it.” She pulled her thin dagger and caressed the blade. “You haven’t been truthful with me. You are just a man from a faraway land who seeks riches and power. In fact, aside from the gateway, your sorcery is not greater than mine. You are no god.”

Lorelei slowly pulled her dagger. “And I believed in you. Worse, I loved you,” she said. “And I’ll mourn you.”

Darren couldn’t part the pain from his core. He struggled to regain his dominance but she eyed him like an owl might a mouse. She angled her dagger and lunged for him.

There came an explosion.

The castle rumbled.

Shards of stone broke from the walls. Darren and Lorelei stood motionless. She whispered, “Not again.”

Another boom roared from the sea, followed by an impact of tremendous force. The room quaked, sending stone dust falling over them. The mighty castle let out a deep groan as the large blocks of its body cracked and compressed.

Lorelei stumbled, falling to her hands and knees. Darren ran past her, through the chamber door and down the hall. He stopped abruptly when a portal opened, very much like his, but made of white mist and blue light.

Oskar and Alek stepped from the portal. Alek whirled the Everblade into position.

Darren mocked, “You two look the part of heroes. Is this where you order me, again, to surrender?”

Alek answered, “This is where you die.”

Darren shot a bolt of lightning at the arching stone ceiling, breaking it apart. Large stones fell, but Oskar waved his hand, catching and holding the broken stones in the air. Darren cast another bolt, this



time, at Oskar. Alek held out the Everblade, trapping Darren's magic within the steel.

Oskar said, "You're not strong enough, Darren. I have the power of four mages and with the Everblade in Alek's hands, you cannot win. Your reign as a false god is over."

"Perhaps you're right. I have overstayed my welcome. It's time for me to leave." Darren opened the Gateway of Realms. The burning red mouth swirled as he leapt inside, knowing Alek would be right on his heels.



The Everblade's force lifted. Lorelei picked herself up and brushed the bits of stone-dust from her hair. A growl sounded behind her. She whirled around to find a hulking storm hound sitting obediently in the chamber doorway.

Lorelei caressed its brown mane. "My beast; such a worthy ally."

Joanell stepped into view, behind the storm hound. "I think so too."

The hound swung his front claws upward, striking Lorelei in the face. She flew backward, crashing through a nearby table.

"Nice work. Now get her," Joanell commanded

Garwin pounced across the room, leaping over the broken table. He grabbed Lorelei as she tried to crawl away, lifted her by her throat, and held her against the wall. He snarled. "Now you'll pay for all you've done, especially for what you've made of me."

Lorelei choked and uttered through her gasps, "I can . . . reverse . . . the spell."

Garwin's grip eased.

Lorelei spat a venomous green mist in his eyes. He recoiled, hollering out in pain as she vanished in a cloud of black smoke.

Joanell kept her sword ready and panned the room for any sign of the witch. Lorelei rematerialized behind Joanell and pressed her dagger to her throat.

She whispered, "This is how your father died. Before I kill you, tell me, did you really think you could stop me?"

"I'm not dead yet."

"Yes you are, girl. Yes you are." Lorelei tilted her dagger's edge and moved to cut into Joanell. Strangely, something held her hand in place. A ghostly, translucent hand clutched her wrist.

Bram's voice came into Joanell's ears, "Take her!"

Torea's rightful queen shoved Lorelei's hand away, side-stepped and slashed her sword behind her. The blade whirred as it sliced deep into the witch's stomach.

Lorelei turned on Joanell, one hand clutching her bleeding midsection, the other gripping her dagger. She swung the dagger out

in front of her, awakening it with magic. The blade grew to sword-length. She sprang forward, jabbing her needle-like tip at Joanell's heart.

Joanell stepped to the right, narrowly dodging the swift attack. In fluid, well-trained steps, she attacked. With her sword over her right shoulder, Joanell stepped forward, delivering a downward strike capable of cleaving helms and breaking shields. Lorelei fell back against the railing, eyes bulging and mouth agape. Joanell twirled her blade, clasped the handle with both hands, and plunged the sword into Lorelei's heart.

She leaned in and said, "That's for my father." She pressed her boot to the witch's bleeding stomach and pulled her blade free.

Lorelei fell to her knees and coughed up blood. She spat and said, "I am not dead yet."

A large eruption roared from the ocean below. Joanell left the terrace. She stopped in the chamber doorway, looked back at Lorelei and replied, "Yes, you are."

A cannon ball tore through the terrace, shattering the stone platform. Lorelei screamed as the structure collapsed under her. Joanell lost her footing from the impact and slipped. Garwin grabbed her belt and pulled her safely to the ledge.

The witch fell to the serrated rocks and raging sea. The heavy stones of the royal balcony crashed over her, dyeing the surf with blood.

## Chapter 22



Alek thought he had entered a tunnel of blood. A cylindrical corridor opened before him, stretching out as far as he could see. The curved, red walls flowed like a gentle stream of half liquid, half vapor. The floor under his feet appeared the same, though it trembled with each step like broken puddles. Beams of light shined from the red walls at random places, creating a weave of colorful columns.

A constant murmur echoed through the hall. Alek tried to comprehend the choir of sounds—an ocean, a roaring crowd, grunting beasts, war horns, buzzing insects, chiming bells, laughter, singing and sobbing.

One sound rang out above the others; Oskar's voice. "Alek, can you hear me?"

"Yes. What is this?"

"You are in trans-dimensional passage that connects all planes of existence. The beams of light you see ahead are shining from portals to other worlds."

"There are so many. How will I find Darren?"

"The Everblade will sense his magic and reveal his path. Be careful, Alek. It is impossible to know what waits beyond each portal."

"What about you and the others?"

"Don't worry about us."

Alek clutched the Everblade in his right hand and aimed the blade's tip down the hall. An arch of purple lightning ignited, streaked down the crimson passage, and struck a portal several paces away. Alek kept the sword aimed. The lightning held to the opening, lapping at Darren's residual magic and sending the power into the sword. Alek hurried and stepped inside.

His boots sank into soft, golden sand and the portal closed behind him. Bright sunlight shined in his eyes, glinting off his gold armor. The air was hot and dry. He brought up his left hand to shield his face and panned the area.

An arid desert surrounded him, with dunes of white-gold sand as fine as powder. A pale pink sky hung overhead. He held out the Everblade. Its lightning surged and bolted over a tall dune.

Alek started his trek though the knee-deep sand and scaled the

powdery hillside, slipping and tumbling with nearly every step. His body itched from the fine sand collecting in the folds of his raiment, while the armor's plates heated in the merciless sun, burning his skin.

His face dripped with sweat as he dug into the dune, using the Everblade for leverage. Finally, he reached the top and peered across a terrain more desolate than Torea's Barrens. He held aloft the sword. Purple lightning blasted forth, striking down on a patch of yellow sand below. The ground quivered like water with hints of red magic sparkling within.

Alek slid down the backside of the dune and trekked over the sand; he stopped when an arrow raced by his head. He turned to see a group of strange warriors atop the surrounding dunes. They mounted gray lizards, larger than horses, each with spines like thorns and long tails that sifted through the sand. The warriors wore armor of bleached bone and carried spears, javelins and bows with quivers of arrows. He could not see their faces; scarves covered their mouths and noses.

The band of warriors commanded the massive lizards to move down the dunes toward Alek. He readied for combat; the Everblade hummed in his hand.

"That shot was a warning, stranger," the lead warrior attested. Alek counted ten of them as they circled him. The lizards hissed and licked at the hot air with forked, black tongues. "I am Kurza, chief hunter for the Molbok Clan. Who are you?"

"I am Alek, son of Borlan, sworn warrior to the Calmoren King and Hall of Fathers. I am the Master of the Everblade."

The warriors jeered. "Quite a title. What are you doing out here in the Garden of Urmalath?"

Alek looked around. "This is a garden?"

"Of course it is!" exclaimed Kurza. "It's rich with golden Tamarite sand. Isn't that what you're doing here? Pilfering from the garden?"

"No. I was just passing through. Listen, I mean you no harm. I am chasing a dangerous sorcerer and he came this way. Now I ask to be released from this detainment. I don't have much time."

Kurza climbed down from his lizard mount and approached Alek. He took off his scarf to reveal a face half man, half lizard. He licked at the air, smelling and tasting Alek at the same time. Alek didn't try to hide his look of repulsion.

"That sword of yours will fetch quite a purse. Give it to me and I'll let you go on chasing your sorcerer."

Alek glared at him. "You're not hunters. You're highwaymen."

"Everyone has a specialty. Now give me the sword."

Alek poised his blade in a guard ready for attack. The circle of lizard-men aimed their bows and angled their spears.

Kurza said, "You're going to be dead in a few seconds."

Alek grinned. "I was going to say the same thing about you."

The Everblade flashed, producing a shockwave of searing magic that blew the men off the beasts, sending them hurdling through the air. The shockwave burst to tendrils of light that pierced their hearts, killing them instantly. Their bodies fell to the soft sand; some rolled down the dunes while others were buried.

The giant lizards hissed and recoiled. Alek approached one slowly with his hand open and palm up. "Easy, friend."

The lizard eased and Alek removed the reins and saddle. The other lizards saw this and approached, eager to be free of their restraints. Alek worked fast and released them all. They hurried away. Some scaled the dunes while others burrowed into the sand.

Alek slowly made his way through the sand, heading for the same destination as his brother. He drove the Everblade into the ground and a white portal appeared. *Darren, I'm coming for you.*

A rushing horse-drawn coach creaked as it bounced over the cobblestone road. The driver shouted, "Outta the way!"

Alek rolled out of the road and slammed against a wooden barrel. Apples as red as rubies fell over him.

A woman wearing a black hooded robe shouted, "I just shined those! You're paying for the bruised ones."

Alek sat up and studied the new world. He was in a marketplace, in the heart of a busy village. Plumes of smoke rose from the short chimneys of shops and houses built of wood and stone. Children ran and played while the townsfolk went about their errands. All things seemed ordinary to Alek. This place was not unlike any other settlement he'd visited. The only odd characteristic was the clothing. Everyone wore hooded, black robes.

The woman tugged at his arm, "Are you listening to me? You owe me money for the bruised ones."

Seeing her, Alek found the other difference in this world. The woman's skin was shiny blue, as if covered in glossy paint. She looked at him and screamed in fright.

He tried to reassure her. "Please don't be frightened. I will not hurt you."

The woman began to cry in terror. She stumbled away from him, hollering for help. The people gathered to see the cause for alarm. Alek scanned the worried faces under the many black hoods. Each person had skin of a different color and shade.

Alek collected himself and hurried into the crowded market. Faces of red, green, orange, blue and purple all stared at him in confusion.

Then he saw Darren's face among the many, watching him from under a black hood. When their eyes met, Darren slipped away, vanishing among the sea of people. Alek pushed past the throngs of

villagers, knocking some down and toppling vendors' carts. The townsfolk began to call out for his capture.

A group of hooded guards responded to the rising chaos and chased after Alek with deadly, hooked swords. "Stop," they shouted, "by order of the Gromerian Guard!"

With Darren nowhere in the marketplace, Alek ran through the town. His armored boots, still full of sand, clopped on the road like horses shoes. People cowered away from him as he ran by but cheered on the pursuing guards.

Alek searched for Darren as he evaded capture and also assessed the obstacles in his path. He leapt over crates, dodged strolling carriages, and ducked under low-hanging awnings and tightly strung clothesline. Ahead, the road came to an abrupt end.

The tall stone wall fortifying the town towered over him. Behind him, the guards closed in. He could hear the chinking and chiming of their swords as they rushed for him.

Alek cut to his left and ran toward a nearby house. The residents slammed their doors and windows closed, but Alek did not intend to intrude. He leapt up, took hold of the porch roof, and swung his body upward. He scaled the building's tiered roofs, trying to get as high as possible. The hooded guards followed after him, ascending the rooftops.

Alek ran across the ridge of the upper-most roof and leapt for the next building. He caught the eave, climbed up, and scaled the next set of tiered roofs. Once atop the highest ridge, he held up the Everblade and cast its lightning. The blast coursed across the town and struck the rim of a large, communal well. The people ran in horror at the sight of Alek on the rooftop with the glowing sword held over his head.

More guards filled the road below. They readied their bows and fired a barrage of arrows. Alek held out the blade in defense and a wall of brilliant purple light formed in front of him, disintegrating the arrows. The wall burst forward, knocking the guards off the opposing roof. They groaned as they landed hard on the ground.

Seeing this display of power, the rest of the guards halted their chase. A fearful silence fell over the town. The dark robed townsfolk, with their colorful faces, watched in fear, waiting to see if he meant to strike them down.

Instead, Alek called out, "I'm not your enemy."

A green-skinned man shouted, "Then what do you want?"

"I want you to let me pass through your town unharmed."

"It's obvious you desire more than that."

"Well . . . I could really use something to drink." He put the Everblade away. The people eased.

The guard, seeing that his men were unharmed, waved for Alek to come down. Once back on the ground, Alek slowly approached and warned, "I will defend myself to the fullest extent, and that is all. Will you agree to this as well?"

"Yes." The green guard put away his sword and tossed Alek a skin of water. "My name is Belstra. Forgive us for charging you. We are normally very hospitable."

"Well met, Belstra. I am Alek. It's been a while since I've been chased down like that," Alek jested. "I'm reminded of my many misadventures as a boy. Am I so frightening to behold?"

"No. It's just that you look of similar species to the man who terrorizes us."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. He is plain-faced, like you. His hands glow and he makes awful things happen. We think he uses our village as testing ground for his dark powers."

"What does he do to you?"

"He conjures horrible beasts that we struggle to slay. He brings down terrible storms that last for many days and nights."

"What does he want?"

"He wants us to worship him. He claims he's a conqueror god. There are those who have defected and swear fealty to him. They've been banished to live outside our walls. I feel sorry for them because I know they worship him out of fear."

"I know this man and he is no god."

"How do you know him?"

"That's not important. I seek to stop him and I've followed his trail here."

Belstra tensed. "Then we must alert the people so they can take up arms against him!"

"That's not necessary. He's gone, and so I must follow. Thank you for the water." Alek moved passed him and headed for the well. The people cleared the way. He paused and asked Belstra, "Before I go, what is this place?"

"This is the Empire of Gromeria."

Alek drew his sword and called to the villagers nearby, "Stand aside." He pointed the blade and shot a current of energy at the well's dark mouth, awakening a bright, white portal. Alek leapt into the well and vanished.



Joanell led Garwin down the hall where they found Oskar; red energy streamed from the mage's hands, holding the Gateway of Realms open. The large passageway whirled and hissed as it pulled in debris.

Cannon fire devastated Castle Torea. Arched doorways, domed ceilings and walls of carved stone crashed down, sending thick plumes of dust and ash blowing through the remaining halls. A deafening explosion occurred, causing a violent tremor under their feet. The floor broke open and the stone blocks of the ceiling began to slide free. The hallway tilted as the keep buckled.

Oskar commanded, "Into the portal!"

The three leapt into the Gateway of Realms as Castle Torea collapsed to the sea.



Alek stumbled through swinging double doors and into a dusty room. An out-of-tune piano filled the air with jovial music. Wood planks made up the floor and building. Clouded windows let in rays of warm sunlight that formed hazy beams. Alek likened the smell of the place to various ales, wines, and mead blends. A curtain of smoke hung over the room. He looked for a fire and found a group of four men holding burning, white sticks in their mouths.

The men sat around a table engaged in a game of some sort, each holding a handful of small cards. A pile of silver coins sat in the center of the table among empty bottles. Alek decided this was a tavern of some kind.

They sat in silence as the warrior approached. With their eyes wide and mouths agape, Alek, with quick and discerning eyes, assessed them.

They wore wide-brimmed hats in a style unfamiliar to him. Their faces were scruffy and caked in dirt. Each man wore leather garments in one cut or another; a vest, leggings, or coat. All four men carried a strange metal object resembling a hammer in a case on their belts. None carried a sword, bow or dagger.

Alek felt more at ease. "Greetings to you," he said. "A tavern is a welcome sight after the travels I've endured."

A man wearing a worn, black hat stood up from the table. "I reckon you're lost, son. What's your name?"

When Alek introduced himself in his usual manner, the man asked, "What in God's name is an Everblade? Say, son, you one of them Roman gladiators or something?"

The men laughed.

"I don't understand," Alek admitted.

"What I don't understand is how you made it past my men on the porch. No one disturbs my poker 'less I expressly authorize it."

"You are some form of sovereign?"

"What? You mockin' me, son? If you're lookin' to get shot, you come to the right saloon."

"Have one of your men bring you a bow and arrow, and I'll let you take your shot," Alek challenged.

“You callin’ me an Indian? Step outside, son. We’re gonna settle this.”

“As you wish.”

Alek followed the man out of the saloon and onto a dirt road lined with square, wooden buildings. The man in the black hat walked to the center of the road. Alek faced him from a few paces away. He drew his sword. It shined brightly in the midday sun. People lined the road, gawking at the man in the gold armor.

Alek called out to his adversary, “Where is your weapon?”

The man pulled the metal object from its sheath, held it in front of him, and pointed its end at Alek. “Right here.”

“What manner of arms is that?”

“Colt forty-four.”

The weapon erupted with a flash and a bang. Alek’s left pauldron ruptured. The force of the blast knocked him back, and he fell to his side in the dirt. The crowd roared in delight.

“You still alive, gladiator man?”

“Unfortunately for you.”

Alek brought himself to his knees and drove the Everblade into the ground. A current of energy ripped down the road, binding the man’s feet with bands of purple light.

Alek pulled the sword from the ground but his adversary remained ensnared. He pointed the blade at the man’s weapon and knocked it from his hand with a short bolt of energy. The man pulled at his feet, trying to break loose. Alek walked calmly down the road toward him. The two faced one another under the blazing sun. Beads of sweat rolled down the man’s brow as Alek loomed over him. The wind rustled the warrior’s cape and hair.

“You gonna kill me now?” the man asked.

“No. I’m going to make you sleep.”

The man trembled, eyeing Alek’s sword. “With more of your magic?”

“You could say that.” Alek pulled back and punched him square in the face. The man’s eyes rolled up and he fell to the ground.

The other men from the saloon pulled their weapons and fired at Alek, who held up his blade and summoned its guiding lightning. The blast found Darren’s point of exit against the wall of a nearby stable. The men cowered at the sight of the sword’s power. They ran across the road, mounted their horses, and rode off. Alek opened the portal and stepped inside, apprehensive about where it might take him.



A vast night sky enveloped him and for a moment, Alek thought he’d stepped into the middle of the universe. Clusters of stars hung low and

bright. Bands of pink, orange, and green haze trailed throughout the blackness and glowed with a timeless radiance. All around him, near and far, auroras of varying colors blazed; each one released a steady wind that blew passed Alek, throwing about his white cape like a restless sail.

He stood on a round platform of interlocking stones, a perfect circle, floating far above any physical world. He was not alone. Darren waited at the top of a tall, narrow staircase stretching up from the edge of the round floor. The sorcerer, in his flowing robes of black and purple, overlooked the plane of endless stars and rippling auroras, not once glancing to regard Alek.

“Welcome to my observatory, brother.”

Alek aimed the Everblade at him, but Darren lifted his hand and the stone plates under Alek parted. Only the red light of Darren’s magic held them together.

Darren warned, “This floor will break apart at my command and you’ll fall to your death. You’re in my realm now, and you’ll play by my rules.”

“Come down here and face me,” shouted Alek. “No more running, no more magic.”

“No magic? An impossible concept.”

Darren fanned his arms and the surrounding auroras bloomed and curled like blood swelling in still water. Darren created a small sphere of light and threw it into the sky. The sphere exploded in a bright flash, sending ribbons of energy into the many auroras, opening each one like a great window.

Alek looked on as images of distant landscapes appeared all around him. He saw worlds of ice, fire, sand, and stone. There shined scenes of green hills, gray mountains and sparkling waters. So many places revealed themselves in Darren’s auroras. There stood castles, towers, houses of clay and wood; islands, trees, jungles and forests. Alek saw strange animals of fur, feather, and scale; unfamiliar races, monstrous creatures and colossal beasts; underground fortresses and floating cities of shining steel; even mighty ships and rolling coaches; then smoky metal vehicles with lights and horns.

Alek saw Calmoren, Torea and the realms he’d passed through. Many other extraordinary worlds appeared and it seemed that there was no end. Darren fanned his arms. The scenes clouded over and the windows closed. The fiery auroras remained, bright in the black sky.

Darren faced Alek and glared at him with glowing red eyes. “So you see. Magic is boundless. It is everywhere. It is everything. From here, I see it all.”

“But you enter those worlds with your sorcery,” Alek challenged. “You trespass, posing as a god. You take whatever power you can and

if there is nothing to take, you use the world for cruel tests of your magic.”

Darren descended the staircase, his hands aglow. “Listen carefully, brother.” Alek remained ready with his sword in both hands.

Darren stood in front of him and continued, “You uphold a pointless moral code, a concept unknown to many realms, and you’ve decided that my endeavors are bad and that I should be stopped. Have you considered that there are lands far away that rely on me? With my knowledge and power, I’ve taken strength from contemptible kingdoms and used it to nourish dying empires. I’ve given them a renewed faith. To those people, I am more of a god than they’ve ever known.”

“You’ve become a murderer and a tyrant.”

“And here you stand, proving my point; you are blinded by your convictions.”

“And you’ve been consumed by yours.”

Darren circled him. “Foolish, Alek. Because you’re my brother and I am compelled to spare your life, I’ll give you one last chance.” He pointed to the top of the staircase and a white portal opened.

“That will take you to Calmoren. Or . . .” he stopped and faced him; a silver, wide-bladed saber appeared in his right hand, “you can stay here and die for your cause.”

The thought of finally returning to Calmoren was like a single beam of sunlight shining through a storm. He clenched his teeth to suppress the desire and thought of Torea, of Joanell, of the poor souls who died by Lorelei’s magic. He thought of Garwin’s torment, of the Barren lands riddled with suffering spirits and of the fallen king. No, he could not go home. Not yet. Not when the home of those he’d come to love remained trapped under Darren’s shadow.

Alek shouted, “For Calmoren, Torea, and Everheart!” He swung the Everblade in a lateral cut, striking the saber from Darren’s hand.

Alek attacked again, kicking Darren in the chest and knocking him to the ground. The warrior leapt into the air, pointing the sword tip to the ground. He drove the tip for Darren’s heart, but the sorcerer rolled away. Sparks sprayed as the steel clashed on the stone. Alek turned and sprang for Darren.

The sorcerer fired a scorching ray of red magic. Alek guarded with the Everblade and the sword pulled in the attack. Darren moved backward, stopping at the edge of the floor. He hurled a series of intense blasts, but the Everblade absorbed them all. Alek held the sword upright and stared at Darren from behind it. Darren halted. Alek saw his distraction and charged forward, thrusting the sword in a deadly lunge. Darren leapt over the attack, flipping in the air, and landing behind Alek, now positioned dangerously close to the edge.

The sorcerer opened his hand, summoning his saber back to his grip. With his blade aimed, he moved in with a lunge of his own. Alek parried, but did not see the small dagger in Darren's left hand. Darren threw the dagger. It streaked by Alek's face, cutting his cheek and brow as it passed. Alek recoiled from the sting of the short blade. Blood poured down his face and into his eyes. Darren punched him and Alek stumbled, falling off the floating platform. He stabbed the Everblade into the stone. The sword cut into the floor, bracing Alek as he hung over the edge.

Darren looked down at his brother, who gripped the sword's handle with all of his strength. A void of stars and blackness waited to swallow him.

"Doesn't this bring back memories? Only this time, we are not children, and I don't feel like saving you."

Darren lifted his boot and stomped on the blade. In that instant, the Everblade released its forceful wave of purple magic, throwing Darren backward. Alek pulled himself up and climbed back onto the floor. He saw Darren rising to his feet. He aimed his sword tip and fired a scorching trident of lightning. Darren met the Everblade's current with one of his own. He pulled energy from a nearby aurora into his right hand. Twisting bands of red, green, and orange light entered him. From his left hand, he released a vigorous beam of magic that raged against Alek's. Darren held back the Everblade's furious lightning and started for the staircase, where the white portal to Calmoren turned.

Alek growled as he forced the Everblade to absorb Darren's overwhelming magic. The Everblade hummed as it harnessed Darren's terrible power. Darren ascended the stairs, keeping his destructive assault constant. Alek dropped to one knee to brace against the increasing force.

The Everblade grew hot; its handle seared Alek's palm. He squinted to see past the blinding light of Darren's attack and focused on the aurora that fueled the sorcerer's devastating spell. He aimed the blade, redirecting Darren's power against the aurora. The purple lightning blasted the heart of the conduit, rupturing the arcane fabric of its body and extinguishing its magical light.

Abruptly severed from the channel of power, Darren's body jerked. He fell to his hands and knees at the top of the staircase.

Alek rushed the stairs; flames of magic trailed from the Everblade like a brilliant torch. The sword's light shined on his golden armor and illuminated the folds of his flowing, white cape. Blood trickled down his face and rolled off his gleaming breastplate. The glowing crystal bound to the sword's pommel pulsated in time with Alek's racing heart. Alek stood over his brother, seeing the bewilderment in his eyes.

Alek put the tip of the sword under Darren's chin. "Stand."

Darren tried to fill his hands with magic but nothing happened. The sword would not allow it. All of his powers, his command over the forces of magic, were banished under the pure and purging light of the Everblade. Then, the floor and staircase cracked.

"You've taken my power," Darren said, "and with it, my control over this realm."

Portions of the floor broke and fell away. The staircase shuddered under them. The stars started to go black, like so many tiny candles being blown out. Auroras faded and blew apart in the wind. The portal behind Darren began to weaken.

Alek pressed his blade tip to Darren's heart. "What's happening here?"

Darren kept his eyes on Alek's sword and answered, "This realm is closing. When a realm closes, it folds into itself again and again until it becomes a particle in the fabric of worlds. If we remain here, we'll be consumed, absorbed."

Alek grabbed Darren by the throat. "A fitting end for you." He threw him down the crumbling stairs.

Darren braced his fall half-way down and glared up at Alek. "You fool."

Darren's body flickered and disappeared. Alek panned the area searching for him. The floor was gone. Only the fragmented staircase remained floating among the stars, its base breaking off in chunks.

Darren appeared behind Alek and shoved him. The Everblade fell out of his hand and chimed as it tumbled down the stairs. Alek leapt for it, catching it as it rolled off the remaining step.

Darren called out, "I'll always remember you, brother!" He stepped into the portal and it began to shrink.

"No!" shouted Alek. He dashed up the stairs as they collapsed under his boots. He jumped for the portal, falling into it only seconds before it closed.

## Chapter 24

Alek landed hard on his chest but quickly rolled back to his feet.

He clutched the Everblade in both hands. The silver sun of winter shone into the room through broken windows. He stood in Oskar's chamber in the school's western tower. He was home. Calmoren.

The biting cold revealed his breath. Snow accumulated in small heaps throughout the chamber and toppled furniture lay strewn about. Amid the clutter and debris, sticking up from the floorboards, waited his old sword coated in frost. He recalled the night Darren first opened the gateway. He held tightly to that sword, trying desperately not to get pulled into the portal.

He whispered, "Am I really home? Is this real?"

Darren answered behind him, "As real as this!" He stabbed Alek with his saber, driving the sharp blade between the armor's plates and through Alek's ribcage.

Alek gasped as the steel ran through him and hollered in agony when Darren pulled it free. He fell forward. Blood pooled from under his armor. He crawled away from Darren.

Alek reached the wall and propped himself up, sitting under the sill of a large window. His vision blurred as he bled. Darren lifted his saber and lined up his strike.

A large figure appeared in the window over Alek. It blotted out the sun, covering Darren in shadow. Darren looked up. Garwin leapt from the window, his claws streaked and his growl rumbled the chamber. The man-beast, in his silver cuirass and blue cloak, pounced on Darren. He slashed at him, ripping through the sorcerer's leather doublet and slicing his flesh. Garwin hurled him across the room. Darren smashed into a bookshelf and fell to the floor.

Garwin leapt at him again, but Darren whirled his saber at the beast. The blade cut deeply into Garwin's unprotected shoulder and rang out when it struck the bone. Blood streaked across the room. Garwin recoiled. Darren slashed at the beast's legs, cutting the meat of this thigh. Garwin let out an agonizing roar and fell, trying desperately to hold back his bleeding.

Darren's breath labored as he frantically tried to flee. He had lost a great deal of blood from the wounds inflicted by Garwin's claws. He

staggered across the chamber, moving past Alek, who remained slouched against the wall. Darren tripped over broken chairs and ruined books. He crawled then, digging his fingernails into the wooden floorboards, pulling himself to the doorway.

He stopped when his hand landed on the instep of a leather boot. Joanell looked down at him. She pulled off her helmet and shook loose her hair. Darren grabbed at her ankle, but she kicked him hard in the face. He rolled over, spitting up broken teeth.

Joanell rushed to Alek and tried to help him up. Alek groaned and took her by the arm.

She brushed Alek's hair from his face and lifted his chin. Their eyes met and she said, "You have to finish this."

Alek saw Darren lying on the floor. The bloody sorcerer slowly lifted up. Joanell reached out her hand. "Rise, warrior. I command you to keep fighting."

The Calmoren sun shined on her, glinting off her royal armor. Her hand reached for him, strong and unwavering. It was not just the hand of a fellow warrior or friend. It was the hand of a queen that beckoned him.

Alek took her hand. She pulled him to his feet.

Darren scurried to the doorway, but the double doors swung open before he could reach the handle. Oskar stood in the doorway and struck Darren with a devastating blast of blue light. The light filled him, pouring out of his eyes, nose, and mouth as he screamed. Oskar's magic held the sorcerer in place; he shouted to Alek, "Now!"

Alek gathered the last of his strength and swung the Everblade in a great arc across Darren's neck. His body fell and his head rolled across the floor.

Everything went quiet. No one moved. No one breathed.

The group gathered around Darren's body in awe that the fight had ended.

Alek tensed. Something was not right. He could no longer see his breath. The room began to warm.

Darren's blood sizzled and evaporated, forming clouds of red magic that rolled over his body like tendrils of heatless flame. The flames devoured the corpse but remained in the center of the room taking the shape of a human. The figure intensified and burned with a hot, red light. The room filled with a searing wind that swirled about, melting the frost and setting fire to the broken chairs and toppled tables.

The Everblade grew hot in Alek's hands as it absorbed the potent, hostile energy. Bands of fire flowed into the blade. Alek shouted to Oskar, "What is that thing?"

"Darren's demonic spirit. We must destroy it."

"How?"



“Together.” Oskar cast two beams of binding white light at the demon taking form. Darren’s spirit writhed in the spell’s grip. Oskar struggled to hold it and yelled over the roaring fire, “We must trap this entity in a physical form in order to strike it down.”

Darren’s spirit lurched for Oskar, nearly breaking the magic binds. Oskar hollered as he unleashed more of his ancient power. A terrible screeching hiss sounded from the fiery demon as Oskar’s light held it.

Garwin limped across the room and stood before the vengeful spirit as it fought to be free of Oskar’s light. He looked over his shoulder and met Alek’s eyes. In that moment, Alek understood the man-beast’s intentions and lifted the Everblade, ready to attack. Garwin threw aside his blue cloak. He unfastened his silver cuirass, dropped it on the floor, and stepped into the maelstrom of flames.

Joanell screamed out, “Garwin! No!”

Garwin lifted his arms and as the demon entered him, he spoke to Joanell, “Farewell, my queen.”

Garwin’s body lurched and convulsed as Darren’s malevolent soul entered his body. He let out a cry of pain that turned to an ominous howl. His eyes glowed with a hateful, red light. The fiery wind strengthened and swirled throughout the chamber, burning their skin. The intolerable heat neared a fatal climax.

Alek did not hesitate. “Good-bye, Garwin.” He drove the Everblade into Garwin’s heart.

An explosion of power blew apart the chamber. Every corner of Calmoren Kingdom saw the blinding eruption. The ground quaked as the western tower crumbled to smoldering rubble. Plumes of smoke and ash darkened the winter sky.



“Easy, my boy,” Oskar said.

Alek opened his eyes and winced from the bright light shining in through the windows. The soothing aroma of incense put him at ease as his vision cleared. His entire torso ached. He found himself clean and resting in a soft bed. Oskar sat at the bedside and brought a small cup of water to Alek’s lips. Alek sipped it and leaned back.

“I’m relieved that you’re awake,” Oskar said.

“How long was I out?”

“Two weeks.”

“I feel so weak.”

Oskar chuckled. “I thought nothing could make you weak.”

Alek gave him a short smile. His head ached. “I could use some food.”

“I’m a step ahead of you.” Oskar pulled a small table to the edge of the bed. A bowl of meaty stew steamed. He helped Alek sit up and

handed him the bowl of stew. Alek drank it slowly.

With the fog lifted from his mind, Alek recognized the room as his bedchamber in his cottage on the edge of Hilt's Rest, on the banks of Overstone Brook. "How long have you been watching over me?"

"The entire time."

"You're a good friend. Thank you."

Oskar nodded.

"Where is Joanell?" Alek asked.

"I'm here." Joanell entered the room. She wore a long green dress, tied at the waist with a sash of golden silk. Her hair was down and curled around her shoulders. The silver tiara sparkled as she stepped through the columns of sunlight. A thick mantle of soft white wool draped around her, clasped at the collar with a brooch of gold.

Oskar moved so Joanell could sit beside Alek. "I'll leave you two. Besides, I believe my tea is boiling on the hearth."

Joanell took Alek's hands in hers. "How are you feeling?"

"Not quite ready for another dance, I'm afraid."

"I can wait."

"How are you, my lady?"

"I'm well. This is such a lovely village and the people have been wonderful. Your king and queen are most honorable. Oskar and I met with the royal council in Calmoren City and told them of everything we endured. They seemed skeptical at first, but when Oskar opened the Gateway of Realms during the assembly, they believed us."

"What of Torea and your people?"

"The cities fought as one and reclaimed the capital. The knights and citizens killed the storm hounds and are burying the dead. Your king offered to send resources to help rebuild our cities and Castle Torea."

"That's good," Alek said, relieved to hear of the victory. "You'll have my help as well."

"Thank you, Alek. You saved my life and my kingdom. For this, I offer you my heart and my love."

"I accept."

Alek pulled her down on top of him and kissed her. His callused hand wove within the tresses of her auburn curls. She smelled of flowery perfume and crisp winter wind. He released her and they stared into each other's eyes for several quiet minutes.

Joanell whispered, "Rest now. I'll be back later."



The Calmoren sun began its descent toward the western horizon. Alek forced his legs over the edge of the bed. With a groan, he hobbled to the window. The icy brook effervesced under a thin coat of ice and the tall pines bowed with branches of snow. Children played on the white

hillside, clapping wooden swords and shouting playful battle cries.

“Stand down, dark witch!” shouted a little boy. “I am Alek the Brave, and I will save this land.”

“Not if I can help it!” hollered a little girl. “See if you can defeat my mighty serpent first!”

Alek smiled but memories of his childhood with Darren brought him deep sadness. He stepped away from the window and began to cry. He cried for his brother, for Garwin, for the innocent people of Torea. He cried because sometimes, even a warrior needs to.

Oskar leaned in the doorway with a cup of tea. “The body always heals before the heart.”

Alek wiped his eyes. “So it seems.”

Oskar entered and stood beside him. “It’s going to take time to triumph over grief.” He parted his cloak and revealed the Everblade, secure in its ornate scabbard. He handed it to Alek. “Grief is a great villain,” Oskar added. “But you know the old saying.”

Alek drew the sword just enough to see its shining blade. “For every great villain . . .” The Everblade rang softly, as if greeting its master, and pulled away his sorrow. “There is a greater hero.”

## About the Author



or New Hampshire author Gardner Michael Browning, writing has

always been a lifelong passion; however, Browning chased another dream prior to becoming a published author. As a boy, his first big dream was to become a professional wrestler. He found his way to two pro-wrestling schools and “learned the ropes.” After years of training in the ring, Browning was offered a job with a New England–based wrestling promotion, and toured the region performing in sold-out venues for nearly five years.



Browning’s writing debut came in 2006, when his first novel, *The Legend of Black Water*, was published by a small press in Wisconsin. Unfortunately, the publisher closed soon after the book’s release. This short taste of success motivated Browning to further pursue his career and redevelop his storytelling ability. Three years later, Browning found a home for his second novel, *Cerulean Isle*, in WiDō Publishing at the end of 2009.

*Cerulean Isle*, a story of tribal mermaids and vicious pirates, proved to be a work worthy of praise. Glowing reviews hit the Internet soon after its release and *Cerulean Isle* continues to entertain readers of all ages. Supportive of Browning’s talent, WiDō Publishing is proud to release the Granite State author’s third book, *Everblade*, a sword and sorcery adventure.

Browning draws inspiration from the many facets of his life. Playing the guitar, cruising in his old Firebird, fishing and video games are the simpler joys; though nothing makes him happier than spending time with his family.